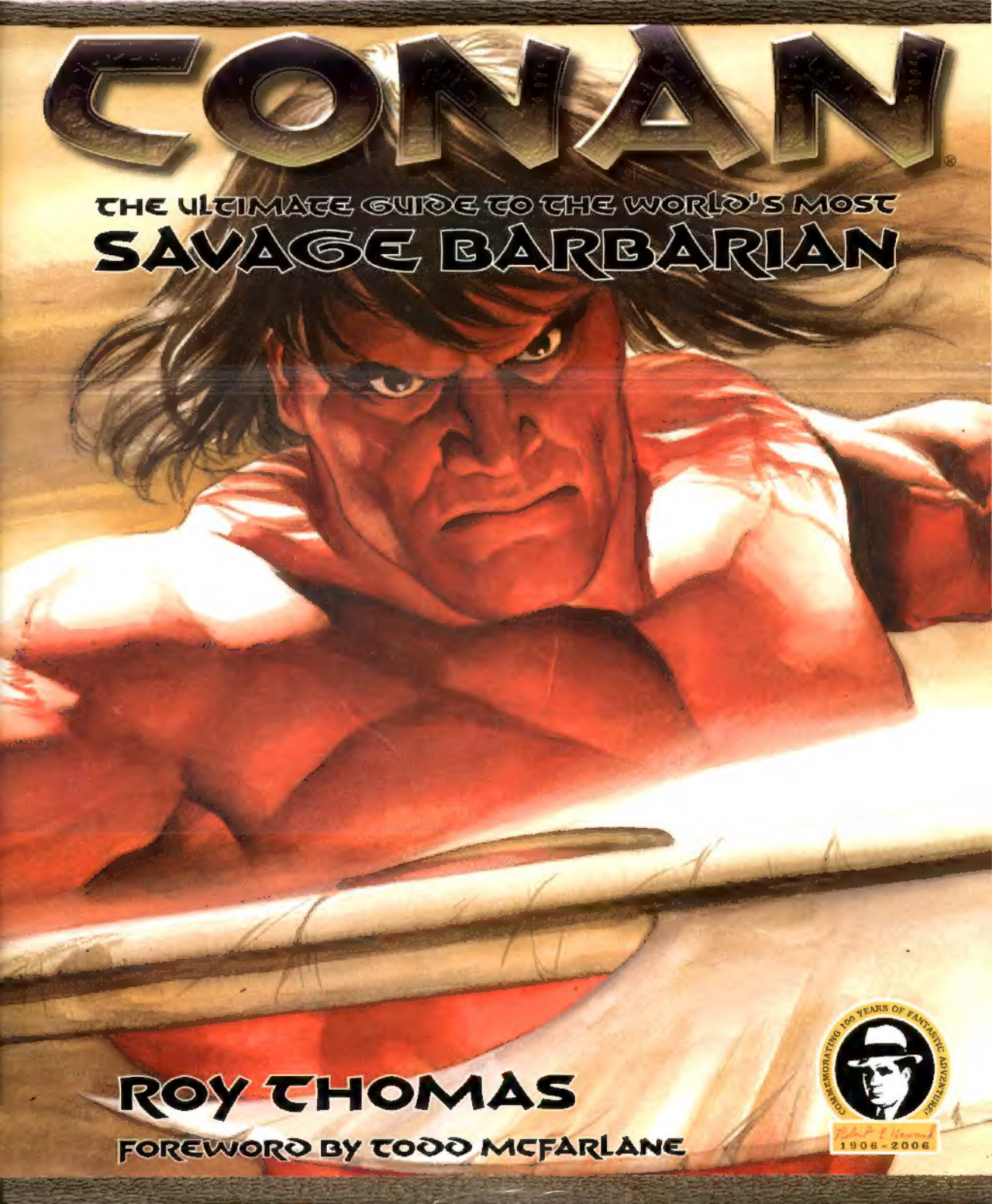
CONAN®

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO THE WORLD'S MOST SAVAGE BARBARIAN



ROY THOMAS

FOREWORD BY TODD MCFARLANE

CONAN

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO THE WORLD'S MOST SAVAGE BARBARIAN

Hither came Conan, the Cimmerian, black-haired, sullen-eyed, sword in hand, a thief, a reaver, a slayer, with gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth, to tread the jeweled thrones of Earth under his sandaled feet...

One hero looms above all others in the world of fantasy. He is Conan, the iron-willed ravager from the North whose daring conquests and extraordinary adventures have captured the imaginations of writers, artists, and fans for over seventy years. And now, for the first time, all of his bloody exploits, strange encounters, fiendish nemeses, and dazzling heroines are gathered together in one lavishly illustrated guide to the life and many near-deaths of Robert E. Howard's most celebrated and enduring creation, Conan the Cimmerian.

From his birth on a blood-soaked battlefield to his brutal usurpation of the throne of the Hyborian Age's most glorious kingdom, Conan's death- and god-defying deeds are legendary, and this fully illustrated guide is a treasure trove of stories and art for fans both new and old. Written by renowned Conan author and scholar Roy Thomas and featuring a foreword by Todd McFarlane, this invaluable tome contains over 800 images from some of the genre's foremost artists, including John Buscema, Frank Frazetta, Gary Gianni, Ken Kelly, Gregory Manchess, Gary Nord, Alex Ross, Mark Schultz, Barry Windsor-Smith, and many more.

For Conan fans, this book is a dream come true—and a dream seventy years in the making. For those new to the Hyborian Age and to Conan, its greatest champion, this is the ideal introduction to a world of fantastic adventure.

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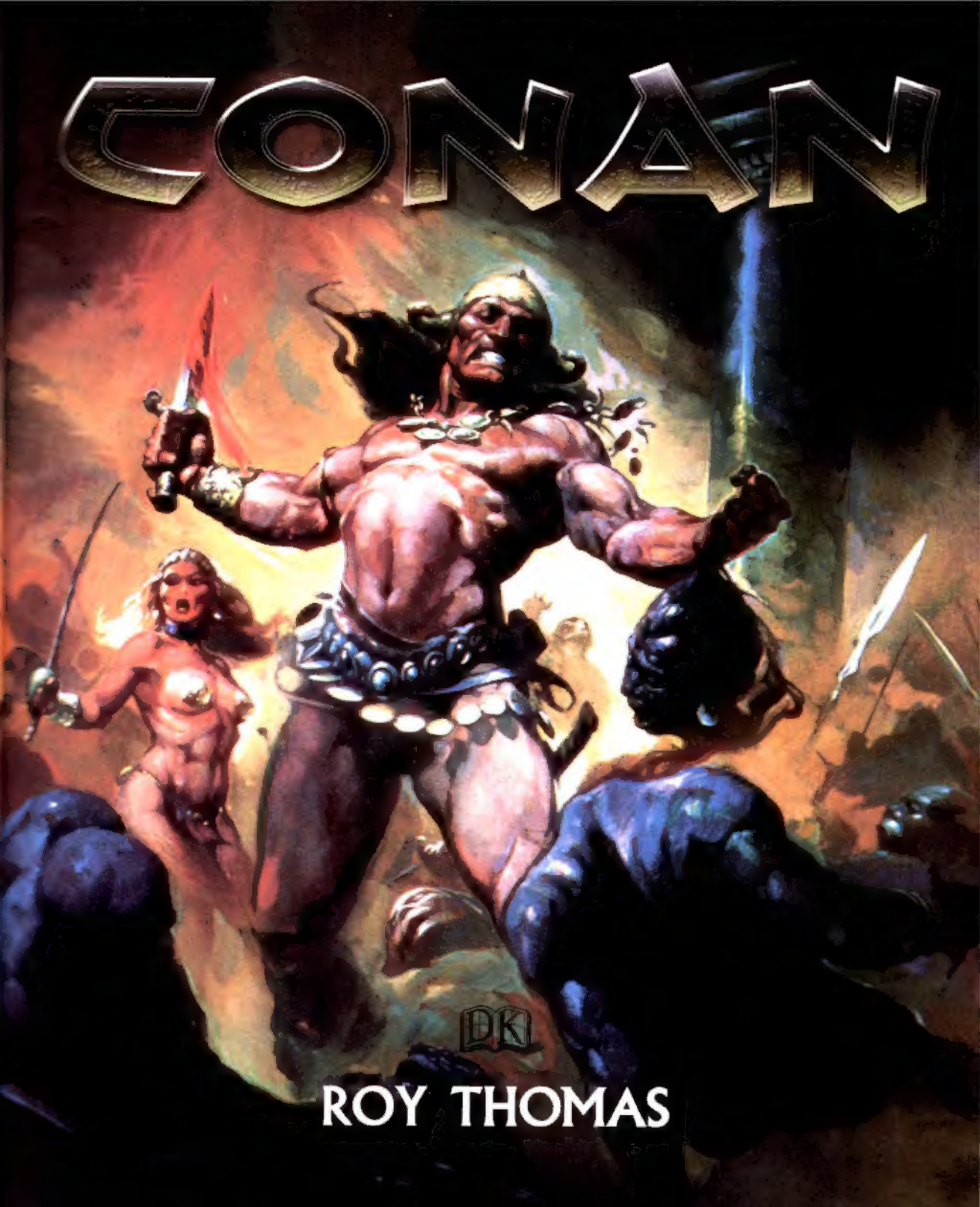

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FOREWORD

I'm not exactly sure when it was, some time in the mid-1970s, when I was still in high school, and scouring the comic racks looking for new issues of my favorite superhero titles. To my surprise, I stumbled upon a previously unnoticed Marvel comic book that had a distinctly different look than any other Marvel or DC comic book of that era. It featured an illustration of a big-muscled, long-haired guy swinging a sword. It's hard to describe precisely why, but it looked very different than a cover of *Thor* that often featured a big-muscled, long-haired guy swinging a hammer.

I picked up the book and thumbed through it. On a hunch, I decided to take a chance on this title and give it a read. I purchased it and took it home. I put it at the bottom of my stack of "must-read-first" superhero comics. Eventually I caught up with those and got to the issue of the unfamiliar comic with the big guy swinging a sword. I cracked the cover, and for the first time I entered the world of Robert E. Howard's Conan!

I don't remember exactly which issue it was but it took place somewhere in the extended story arc featuring the adventures of Conan and Bêlit, Queen of the Black Coast. John Buscema's illustration style, enhanced by the inks of Ernie Chan, seemed very different from his previous work I had admired on numerous superhero books like *Fantastic Four*. The figure drawing was more elegant and expressive, the poses more dynamic, and the storytelling more fluid than any of Buscema's work that I had experienced before. He seemed to be very at ease with these characters and the world they inhabited.

Oh, and let's not forget the storyline. Even though I knew I was picking up the adventure in the middle of an extended story arc—I felt right at home on the decks of the pirate ship the *Tigris* and in the jungles of the Black Coast. I decided to add Conan to my list of "must-read" comics.

Even though it was the powerful artwork that first caught my attention, in no time at all I was fully immersed in the rich, wild mythos of the Conan saga as it was so masterfully written by Roy Thomas. Conan wasn't like any other comic book hero. Conan didn't have a standard-issue comic book character gimmick or a hang-up. He wasn't the most famous person in the universe like Superman, nor was he a guilt-ridden neurotic like Spider-Man. He wasn't a mythological god like Thor or Hercules. He wasn't the world's most brilliant scientist like Reed Richards in Fantastic Four.

He was just a guy. Well, a big guy. A big strong guy. And he was a barbarian.

Conan was described as being "sullen-eyed...with gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth." And most importantly, Conan had no powers beyond his brute strength and his wolfish cunning. It was easy for a kid like me growing up on the great plains of western Canada to believe that people like Conan had once lived long ago before the ages of science and reason changed the ways of the world.

My enthusiasm for the world of Conan grew when I discovered and started collecting the black-and-white Conan magazines. The pages were bigger and the artwork had a grittiness that wasn't on display in the color comic titles. I later learned that this was because the magazines weren't governed by the same restrictions as the color comics, and therefore were able to push the envelope as far as more mature subject matter—sex and violence.

And I think it was in one of Roy Thomas' informative text pieces in back of the *Savage Sword of Conan* magazine that I became aware of the paperback books—the source of the Conan epic. I collected every one of those books that I could lay my hands on. This was like hitting a double jackpot. The cover paintings by Frank Frazetta were simply astounding. The amount of sweeping cinematic

storytelling contained in each illustration was incredibly instructive to me as a developing artist. I learned a lot about composition, design, figure rendering, and color theory studying the little reproductions of those ground-breaking images.

I also liked the fact that the Conan paperbacks were numbered. It appealed to the collector in me as I tried to snag a complete run of the paperbacks.

And then behind the colorful covers, inside the book, I first encountered Robert E. Howard's magnificent words. I became totally immersed in the broad, sweeping scope of these incredible adventure stories.

This Conan was the best of all!

The descriptive prose was earthy and visceral. "Pure adventure yarns with a touch of weirdness," said Howard's contemporary colleague, H. P. Lovecraft. And he wasn't kidding!

In Conan's world, barbarism was the natural state of humankind. It was the sort of world where people assumed all strangers were enemies until proven to be a friend. The veneer of civilization was thin and fragile and if you scratched its delicate surface underneath, there roiled a dangerous world filled with violence and cruelty.

And sorcery.

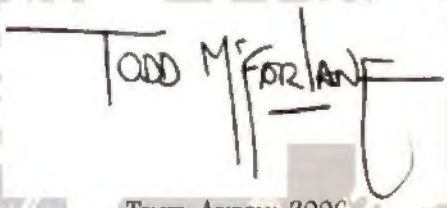
Oh man, the pervasive stench of evil sorcery practically wafted off of every page of prose. Needless to say, I was thoroughly entertained!

As I've gotten older I've come to appreciate Robert E. Howard's Conan more and more. It's amazing to me what a dense environment he created so convincingly, in so few tales, over a mere handful of years. Howard had an incredible instinct for telling an adventure tale that resonates to this day. The countries and characters he created for the pulp pages of *Weird Tales* more than 70 years ago have enthralled generation after generation in comic books, movies, and gaming since his tragic death in 1936. When my company, McFarlane Toys, was offered the chance to make action figures based on the words of Robert E. Howard's Conan it was an opportunity too good to be missed.

This volume is a magnificent tribute to the world of Conan authored by my old friend, Roy Thomas. Roy gave me my first big-league assignment on a DC book called *Infinity Inc.* I learned a lot working with Roy on a team book. (Part of what I learned was to swear never to work on a team book with dozens of costumed characters ever again. But that is a whole nother story!)

All kidding aside, Roy Thomas is a genuine gentleman. And his passion for the Conan character is second to none. Over the last 35 years he, as much or more than anyone else, has contributed countless amounts of time and energy to keeping the flame of the Conan mythos front and center. Several generations of sword and sorcery fans can trace their interests in the genre directly back to experiences similar to mine—discovering Conan in the pages of a comic book either authored or edited by Roy Thomas.

When the great folks at Conan Properties asked me if I was interested in scribing a few words to introduce this impressive guide to the world's most savage barbarian, I jumped at the chance. Roy's love affair with this character and his world has never faltered. So, I appreciate not only the opportunity to publicly express my thanks to Roy, but also for the chance to tip my cap to the memory of Robert E. Howard. And of course, to thank the greatest adventure hero of all time—Conan the Barbarian—for the hours of entertainment he has given me over a lifetime.



TEMPE, ARIZONA 2006

CONAN

IN THE NEMEDIAN CHRONICLES

Know, O prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the Sons of Aryas, there was an Age undreamed of, when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles under the stars—Nemedia, Ophir, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery, Zingara with its chivalry, Koth that bordered on the pastoral lands of Shem, Stygia with its shadow-guarded tombs, Hyrkania whose riders wore steel and silk and gold. But the proudest kingdom of the world was Aquilonia, reigning supreme in the dreaming west. Hither came Conan, the Cimmerian, black-haired, sullen-eyed, sword in hand, a thief, a reaver, a slayer, with gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth, to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth under his sandaled feet."

So reads the sole surviving fragment of the fabled Nemedian Chronicles from the dim and distant Hyborian Age. Little is known of these Chronicles, save that they were written down by scribes in Nemedia, the second-mightiest kingdom in the west of that long-ago day, and that they recorded—among perhaps other things—the life and legends associated with the matchless Cimmerian soldier of fortune known as Conan the Barbarian....

FACTS—OR FANTASY?

The few undisputed facts concerning Conan's life are all contained in 21 stories of varying lengths, plus a handful of uncompleted tales and lean outlines, which were written between 1932 and 1936 by Robert E. Howard of Cross Plains, Texas.

It's not known how this young writer for American pulp magazines learned so much about the life and times of a warrior who lived and fought many millennia ago. But perhaps some hint may be gleaned from letters he wrote to fellow authors about how Conan "seemed to step full-grown into my consciousness when I wrote the first yarn of the series." He said it was as if, for weeks at a time, the Cimmerian "took complete possession of my mind and crowded out everything else"—as if Conan were standing at his shoulder, telling aloud stories that Bob merely transcribed.

The barbarian did not relate his exploits in the order they had happened to him. As Bob Howard explained: "The average adventurer, telling tales of a wild life at random, seldom follows any ordered plan, but narrates episodes widely separated by space and years, as they occur to him." It has been left to later scriveners to arrange these occurrences in roughly chronological order.

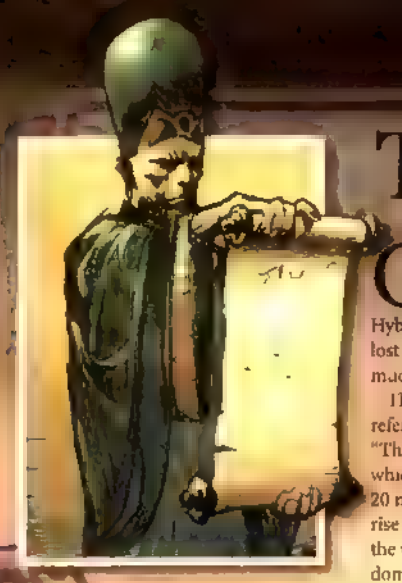
HERE BE LEGENDS

Besides this authentic canon, the subsequent years have given rise to an unverifiable but often fascinating body of lore around the larger-than-life figure of Conan. Such tales may or may not be based on actual events that occurred in that distant eon. We have tried, in these pages, to make it clear when we are dealing with episodes or entities whose truth is not vouched for by the writings of Robert E. Howard himself.

Perhaps some or all of these things actually did happen. Perhaps none of them did. Yet they are all part of the illustrious legend of Conan.

Let us begin to explore the exciting and eldritch world of this savage, sword-wielding Cimmerian...

...A THIEF... A REAVER... A SLAYER...



The Hyborian Age

Conan lived during the era that scholars and dreamers alike call "The Hyborian Age." But mankind's lost prehistory extends back much farther even than that.

The Nemedian Chronicler referred to that earlier period as "The Pre-Cataclysmic Age," which probably occurred 15 to 20 millennia ago. This era gave rise to the Thurian civilization, the waning days of which were dominated by the mainland kingdoms of Valusia, Grondar, Thule, and others, all of whom spoke a common language. But that time had its barbarians as well, including the Picts, the Atlanteans, and the Lemurians. These tribes dwelt on islands or small continents far out on the Western Ocean. The Atlanteans were the ancestors of the Cimmerians—the race from which Conan would one day spring—and the mightiest of them all was Kull of Atlantis, who rose to become king of civilized Valusia.

"Then," as Robert E. Howard wrote, "the Cataclysm rocked the world."

BARBARIANS IN A STRANGE NEW WORLD

The Great Cataclysm' Volcanoes and earthquakes destroyed the mighty Thurian cities, reducing their once-proud culture to savagery. Atlantis and Lemuria sank beneath the seas, and the Pictish Isles were heaved up, forming the mountain peaks of a new continent.

In the centuries that followed, the untamed island races migrated to the mainland in seagoing vessels, where the Atlanteans and the Picts fought a series of bloody wars that left both sides in a near-bestial state. The Lemurians were enslaved for thousands of years by an ancient race on the main continent, and theirs became a history of brutal servitude.

THE RISE OF THE HYBORIANS

The first tribe of survivors to begin the steep climb back to a state of civilization were the Hyborii, for whom this age is named. This was a time of wanderings and conquests, as tribes mingled and mixed and formed new peoples. The first of the Hyborian realms to come into existence was Hyperborea, whose inhabitants turned abruptly from a nomadic life and began erecting dwellings of naked stone in the far north.

The years that followed, other Hyborians founded kingdoms of their own. The first of these was the more southerly state of Koth, which bordered the lands of the nomadic clans that would soon establish the domain called Shem. The dusky-skinned Zhemrians, who were descended from the remnants of one of the Thurian dragon-states, founded the eastern kingdom of Zamora. And a hybrid race, formed of Picts, Hyborians, and the aggressive dwellers of the Valley of Zingg, brought forth a kingdom all their own. They called it Zingara.

They ruled a territory to the south of the great River Styx, which wound its way like a serpent to the Western Ocean. Other branches of once Lemurians trekked eastward, where they gradually evolved into the Hyrkanians and the Khitans. And all the while, the dark-skinned tribal inhabitants of the far south lived in isolation.

This, then, was the high Hyborian Age.

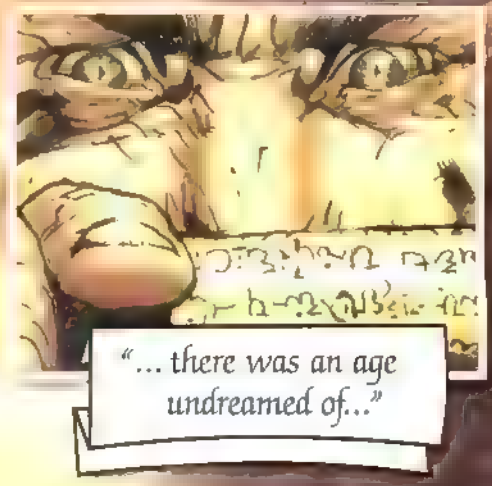
This was the Age of Conan.

THE AGE OF CONAN

Over the next 4,000 or 5,000 years, many of the migrating clans gradually built new and civilized nation-states in the large central land mass, including Aquilonia, Nemedia, Ophir, Brythunia, Argos, Corinthia, and the Border Kingdom. The Picts, however, remained in a state of unbridled savagery.

Meanwhile, dwelling north of Aquilonia were the Cimmerians, ferocious Atlantean-descended barbarians untamed by any invaders. Still farther north, other strands developed into the red-haired inhabitants of Vanaheim and the blond denizens of Asgard.

The descendants of the Lemurians at last rebelled, threw off their masters' yoke, and became the Stygians.



MAP OF THE HYBORIAN WORLD

THIS MAP OF THE KNOWN WORLD AT THE TIME OF CONAN THE CIMMERIAN IS BASED ON A CHART DRAWN BY ROBERT E. HOWARD.

0 300 600 1200

SCALE IN MILES

PATHENIA
HYRKANIA
KARA KORUM
Wan Tengri
Shu Chen
LEMURIA
Shaulun
Peikang
Rhamdam
Onagrul
Khorsf
KUSAN
Rao Gen
KHITAI
Secunderam
MERU
GHULISTAN
KAMBUJA
KOSALA
Ayodhya
Gwarderkan
Pechchaur
Khorata
VENDHYA
MU
WESTERN OCEAN
SOUTHERN SEA

Major Gods of the Hyborian Age

Hall of a God
One legend states that Conan was once granted a vision of Crom's hall, built of giant logs, but most agree that Crom dwells deep in a mountain.

CROM

Like most lands of the Hyborian Age, Cimmeria had many gods, and at one time or another Conan swore by all of them! Their names were Lir, Mannanan, Morrigan, Badb, Macha, Nemain, and Crom.

Although not given to theological discussion, Conan did at times make known his feelings on the afterlife: "There is no hope here or hereafter in the cult of my people. In this world men struggle and suffer vainly, finding pleasure only in the bright madness of battle; dying, their souls enter a gray, misty realm of clouds and icy winds, to wander cheerlessly throughout eternity."

CONAN ON CROM

We know little about Crom, except what Conan said about him: "Their chief is Crom. He dwells on a great mountain. What use to call on him? Little he cares if men live or die. Better to be silent than to call his attention to you; he will send you dooms, not fortune! He is grim and loveless, but at birth he breathes power to strive and slay into a man's soul. What else shall men ask of the gods?"

When his pirate mate Belit asked him if he feared the gods, he replied, "I would not tread on their shadow." Which we should take as a "yes."

Crom Descends?

According to one tale, Crom did intervene directly in the affairs of Conan once and once only. While attempting to rescue his wife Zenobia from a Khitan wizard, Conan was attacked by demons. While teetering on the brink of death, he saw a great and gloomy hall. On a throne surrounded by somber warriors sat the tall, moody, black-maned, dark-eyed god himself, and he was not about to allow the "black arts of the East" to have Conan's soul. A great light flared from the god's outstretched hand, renewing the barbarian's ebbing strength.

YMIR

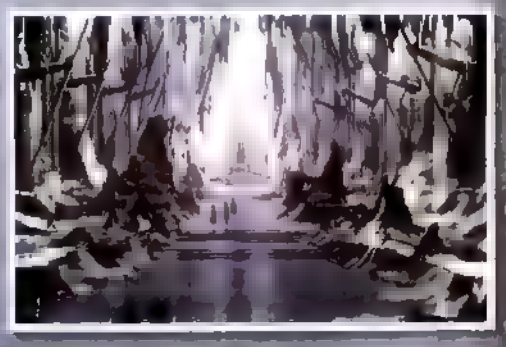
He was the frost giant, the principal godling of Vanaheim and Asgard. He ruled over Valhalla, the legendary hall where the souls of dead warriors congregated.

It is possible that some of these warriors were reincarnated as lesser frost-giants, such as the hapless pair that once tried to stand between Conan and a woman he was pursuing. That woman, of course, was Ymir's daughter Atali. Like the Valkyries of later Norse myth, she was known to appear to those who had been mortally wounded in battle.

While we know little of Ymir's cult or rites, he seems to have been primarily a god of storm and of battle. It is likely that blood sacrifices were made to him—sacrifices that may or may not have included human beings.

Rites... and Wrongs?
Ymir was a god of battle, and some scholars believe that the bloodlust of its followers often led them to make grisly sacrifices in his name.

Old Warriors Don't Die... They Go to Valhalla
At times Valhalla was described as a desolate, snow-covered plain, and at others as a vast hall.

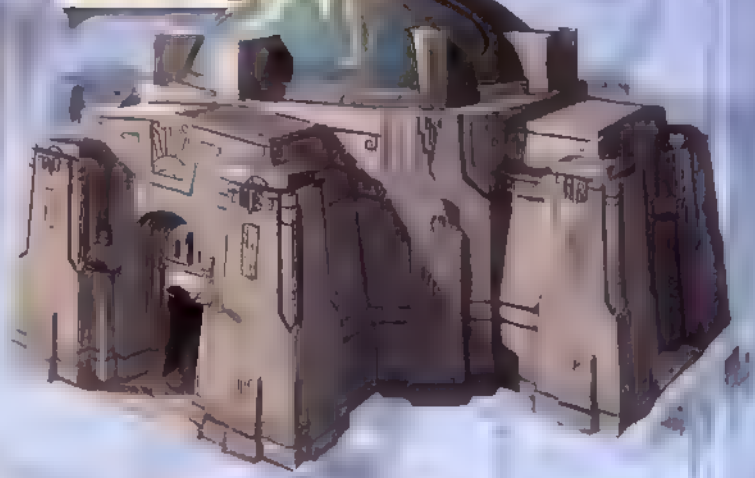


MITRA

He was a civilized person's god, whose followers believed him to be omnipresent. No human being could ever know what Mitra actually looked like, but he was often depicted "in idealized human form, as near perfection as the human mind can achieve." One statue of him in the eastern desert kingdom of Khoraja was known to speak to those who came before it, although some suspected that it was actually a priest of Mitra doing the talking from behind an ornate screen or curtain.

The Face of God
One carved statue of Mitra had the aspect of a handsome man with magnificent shoulders, a patriarchal beard, and thick curls of hair confined by a simple band about the temples.

On Your Feet
Mitraic temples were civilized places, where worshippers were expected to stand upright before their god, not crawl about on their bellies like worms.



THIS I BELIEVE...

Mitra did not require even animal sacrifice, let alone the ritual slaughter of human beings that was all too common in the Hyborian Age. In Mitraic theology, there was a heaven and a hell, and men's souls were subject to judgement, based upon the kind of lives they led. Some even believed that Mitra wanted people to forgive their enemies, in a foreshadowing of the "golden rule" of a much later era.

Mitra's votaries seem to have tolerated the worship of other gods—as long as Mitra was acknowledged as supreme. And there seem to have been saints in the Mitraic universe, as men were heard to swear by them on occasion.

If there existed a female consort for Mitra, her name is no longer known. As one scholar phrased it, "Mitra stood essentially alone."

ISHTAR

To many, the chief god was a woman, Ishtar. The practice of worshipping this goddess originated with the nomadic Sons of Shem, the people who would eventually found a kingdom of that name.

Ishtar was known as the Earth-Mother, and if there were any male gods in the pantheon of the Shemites, their names are unknown to us—so completely did goddess worship eclipse all other rituals in that pastoral land.

THE LONG AND INVITING ARMS OF THE GODDESS

Although a Shemitish goddess in origin, during Conan's time Ishtar was also worshipped in the Hyborian land of Koth, as well as a few smaller kingdoms that had been founded by Kothians. This was probably because Koth's king held sway over much of Shem, and there was a great deal of intermarriage, trade, and other contact between the two peoples. And so, even in Koth, the worship of Ishtar gained precedence over that of Mitra.

The One and Only
Ancillary incarnations of Ishtar were known as Ashtoreth and Derketo, but neither were as revered as the Great Earth Mother herself.

DO NOT SEEK TO KNOW ALL BARBARIAN THAT IS WRITTEN IN THE IRON-BOUND BOOKS OF WITHELOS THE BLIND!
LIBRO WAS MY PRIEST IN DAYS WHEN GODS AND MORTALS WALKED HAND IN HAND- BUT HE WAS UNWORTHY OF THIS HONOR
HE STOLE THE LIFESTONE, BECAME RICH AND ALL BUT IMMORTAL IN IT'S GLOW
WHEN HE LOST THE GEM, HE KNEW IT WOULD CAUSE ITSELF TO BE BROUGHT HERE. SO HERE HE CAME
NOW, HE IS DEAD. THE LIFESTONE IS MINE AND THERE IS EVEN NEW TREASURE WITHIN THE WALLS OF ABABENZZAR!
NO PRECIOUS STONE SHALL EVER AGAIN LEAVE THIS MY CITY

A TASTE OF THE EXOTIC

Ishtar's temples were rich, lavish, and exotic. They must have held great appeal to westerners who found Mitra too dry, too distant, too cerebral.

Her colorful rituals included ornate ceremony and blood sacrifice—although only of animals. According to one scholar, "her ivory idols combined southern sensuousness with northern restraint."

Major Gods of the Hyborian Age

The Fate of the Infidel
Set was a god of darkness, and nonbelievers were often subjected to unspeakable rites and dooms far worse than death

SET

This was the major god of Stygia, that mysterious land of pyramids and serpents south of the River Styx. His image—his totem—was the serpent. Indeed, pythons that dwarfed any seen in our modern world lay coiled within his sinister subterranean temples. These reptiles were known to slither forth by night to devour hapless folk who walked the streets of Stygian cities—and, because the snakes were held sacred, no man dared raise a hand to stop them.

In the days of the evil empire of Acheron, some 3,000 years before Conan lived, much of the world was dominated by Set, who then was worshipped in both Acheron and Stygia. By Conan's time, however, worship of Set was confined to Stygia and the regions under that nation's influence. The Hyborians to the north did not consider Set to be a god at all, but merely an arch-demon!

BEHIND CLOSED TEMPLE DOORS

Little is known of the rituals of Set's religion, since Stygians hated foreigners. But Conan himself encountered sinister processions of masked priests in the streets of Khemi, the Stygian capital, and wholesale human sacrifices were not unheard of. It was a point of faith among the priesthood of Set that "blood aids great sorcery."

The Black Ring

Although many priests of Set were known to be mages, the most feared of these were those whom the Chronicler of the Conan tales called "the grisly wizards of the Black Ring... grim votaries who practice their abominable sorceries amid the black vaults of Stygia and the knighted domes of accursed Sabatea." This was an inner circle composed of the most powerful followers of Set. Chief among these in Conan's time was Thoth-Amon, although the resurrected Xaltotun could have given him a challenge for primacy had he survived his encounter with the Cimmerian.

TARIM

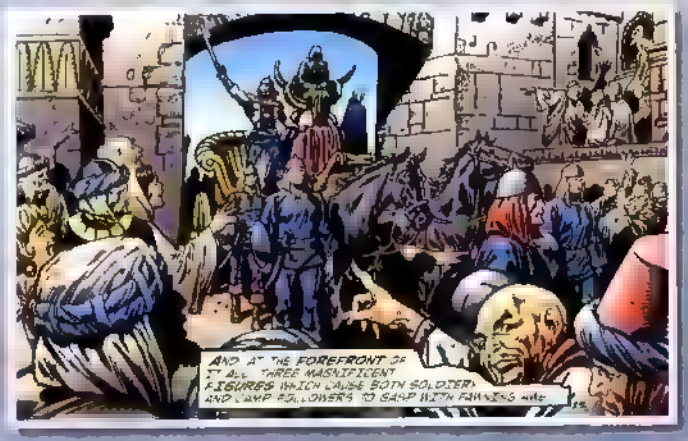
Like Erlik, Tarim was a principal god of the Turanians and their ancestral people, the Hyrkanians. Although less sinister than Erlik, Tarim's origins and nature are likewise obscure and half-forgotten. By most accounts, he is a deity to be sworn by, and nothing more.

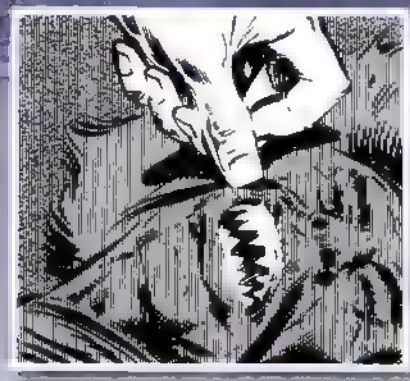
THE WAR OF THE TARIM

Still, in one epic cycle known as "The War of the Tarim," he was a very real presence on Earth, for a time. That tale relates how Tarim was thought to be a man, the reincarnation of a being who had founded the Hyrkanian race in the days before the Cataclysm. Hyrkanians from the city-state of Makkalet kidnapped this man-god from his temple in Turan, prompting Prince Yezdigerd himself to lead a seaborne assault on Makkalet, destroying the city and reclaiming its god.

Conan, however, had seen the truth: the "Living Tarim" was in truth nothing more than a mentally defective man, who was incinerated in a temple fire as the city fell. Yet even his corpse was treated as a holy relic. What real events or lotus dreams may lie behind the saga of the War of the Tarim is for scholars to debate.

Behold Your God!
The death of the supposed man-god Tarim did not prevent Yezdigerd from parading its burnt skeleton through the streets in his hour of glory before returning it to Aghrapur.


AND AT THE FOREFRONT OF IT ALL, THREE MAGNIFICENT FIGURES WHICH CAUSE BOTH SOLDIERS AND CAMP FOLLOWERS TO GASP WITH AWWING AWE.



A Sign of Devotion
Like Set, Erlik was a dark god. His worshippers were known to perform violent acts on his behalf, and some of them even filed their teeth to sharp points – the better to draw out the sacrificial blood from nonbelievers.

ERLIK

He was one of the chief gods of Turan, the eastern empire that grew in strength and rapaciousness during the Hyborian Age. But despite the fact that he was worshipped by the lordly classes in Aghrapur and the other great Turanian cities, virtually nothing is known of him or of his cult.

One scholar of things Hyborian identifies the Erlik worshipped in Conan's day with a legendary entity of the same name who was also called "The Lord of the Black Throne." Like Lucifer in the poetry of our era's John Milton, this Erlik rebelled against the creator god. For his impudence he was cast into darkness. But, by way of compensation, he became thereafter, in that scholar's words, "the ruler of seven demon-haunted underworlds, from which his emissaries went out nightly to hunt down the souls of evil-doers and recruit them for his black forces."

FOR THEIR DEVIOUS ROUTE WAS CONFUSED EVEN HIS PRIMITIVE SENSE OF DIRECTION
GREETINGS! WHERE ARE WE?
SPEAK UP, WHOEVER YOU ARE!

ASURA

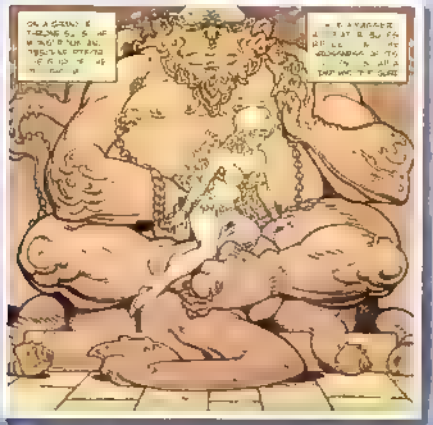
Vendhya, far to the east of the Hyborian kingdoms and even of Turan, was home to the god Asura. As one would expect when dealing with civilizations more than 120 centuries in the past, little has been recorded concerning the ceremonies of this cult. However, it is known that they believed in a heaven and a hell, the judgment of souls after death, and the promise of purification and forgiveness of sins.

ASURANS ABROAD

Unlike the sinister and hated Stygians, Vendhyans established worship centers in other lands, including Aquilonia. But because the Asurans' rituals were a secret and the very location of their temples often were unknown to the local populace, they were wrongly believed by many Aquilonians to be cannibals who prayed to the Stygian god Set. This belief was apparently bolstered by the Asurans' excessive clannishness and their customary black garb.

Friends in Strange Places
In a surprising turn of events, the fugitive King Conan once found succor in the temple of Asura at Tarantia. When he reclaimed his throne, he repaid the sect by lifting its outcast status in Aquilonia.

This Is No Bull
The god Pteor, according to some scholars, was often depicted in the form of a bull – but clearly not always, as in this rendering from a legend of the Hyborian Age.



PTEOR

This god was one of the chief deities of Pelishtia, a Shemitish nation, but we know practically nothing of him or of his worship. Some 2,000 years or more after the Great Cataclysm, the Hyborian meadowlands were invaded from the east by clans of nomadic savages known as "the Sons of Shem." Having conquered that land, the interlopers combined with the agricultural locals to form the land called Shem.

Their religions—like their blood—became intermingled. The deity of each nomadic tribe was a sky-god, who was thought to command the weather. This male god was also thought to have mated with the Earth-Mother of the original inhabitants.

One scholar suggests that "Pteor probably evolved along these lines." However, this does not explain why the god was often depicted as an obscenely obese creature by some of his followers, or why others would claim that his true form was that of a bull.

The Blood Defilers

Adventurers traveling through the uncharted wilds of Hyboria occasionally reported dreadful encounters with these remnants of the dark kingdom of Acheron – though doubtless many more never lived to tell the tale. Born of macabre sacrificial rituals and composed of congealed blood surrounding a magical stone heart, they were said to be the guardians of six sacred statues that dripped blood into basins below. If a traveler wished to treat with these devils, he had to offer a blood sacrifice of his own.

CONAN

THE CIMMERIAN

Conan was born into a clan that claimed an area in the north western part of hal capped Cimmeria. His grandfather was a member of a southern Cimmerian tribe who fled from his own people because of a blood feud. After long wanderings, which included journeys to the Hyborian lands to the south, he returned to Cimmeria and took refuge with another tribe in the north. At night before a roaring fire, he would spin elaborate tales of his travels and his eyes would have grown wider at each telling than the fierce blue orbs of his black maned grandson.

BORN ON A BATTLEFIELD

Conan's mother's name is given in one source as Greshan, his father's as Corin— some even say he had a sister. However nearly every detail concerning Conan's family and lineage is cloaked in mystery — even the name of his tribe, though it may have been "Snowhawk." We know that Conan himself was born during a pitched fight between his own tribe and a horde of raiding Vanir, as the inhabitants of Vanaheim were known, but nothing more of his life before the age of young manhood is established beyond dispute. It seems likely, however, that both Conan's parents were dead by the time he wandered south to pursue his destiny.

THE BOY IS FATHER TO THE MAN

From childhood, Conan seems to have been a hardy specimen and a fighter to be reckoned with. Before he had seen fifteen snows, his name was repeated around the council fires. One account says that while still a boy, he fought off an entire pack of wolves barehanded, saving the life of a hunter trapped beneath a fallen tree, and that he finally killed the lead wolf by tearing its throat out with his teeth.

Another relates how, at the age of fourteen, he made a name for himself in his tribe by slaying a fellow tribesman who tried to murder him. According to yet another legend, he was sent out into the wooded hills on his fifteenth birthday to undergo rites of survival, and while there, he was initiated into the ways of man and woman by a mysterious beauty called Ursula, who roamed the wilderness in the company of two great white bears.

Whatever the truth behind any of these exploits, it is not difficult to imagine Conan performing them all, and numerous others besides.

The Lands of the North

CIMMERIA

Cimmeria was hardly a kingdom at all, for its tribes would only band together as a unit when severely threatened by an outside force—and then, only for as long as it took to repel that foe. It was a gloomy land of thick trees and high windy hills, with skies that seemed always to be gray and overcast. To the south, beyond a stretch of pastoral lands, lay empire-hungry Aquilonia, while on other sides were the howling Pictish Wilderness and the savage lands of Vanaheim, Asgard, and Hyperborea. The Cimmerians fought their many adversaries and each other with iron weapons, and they worshipped the god Crom, who hardly noticed. If any Cimmerian other than Conan ever left this savage homeland, none is mentioned in any verifiable account. Certainly Conan himself never encountered any other Cimmerians on his travels—and he went *everywhere*!

A Land of "Little Mirth"
Conan once said of Cimmeria, "There is little mirth in that land, and men grow moody and strange." The moodiest of them often found themselves facing the business end of his broadsword.

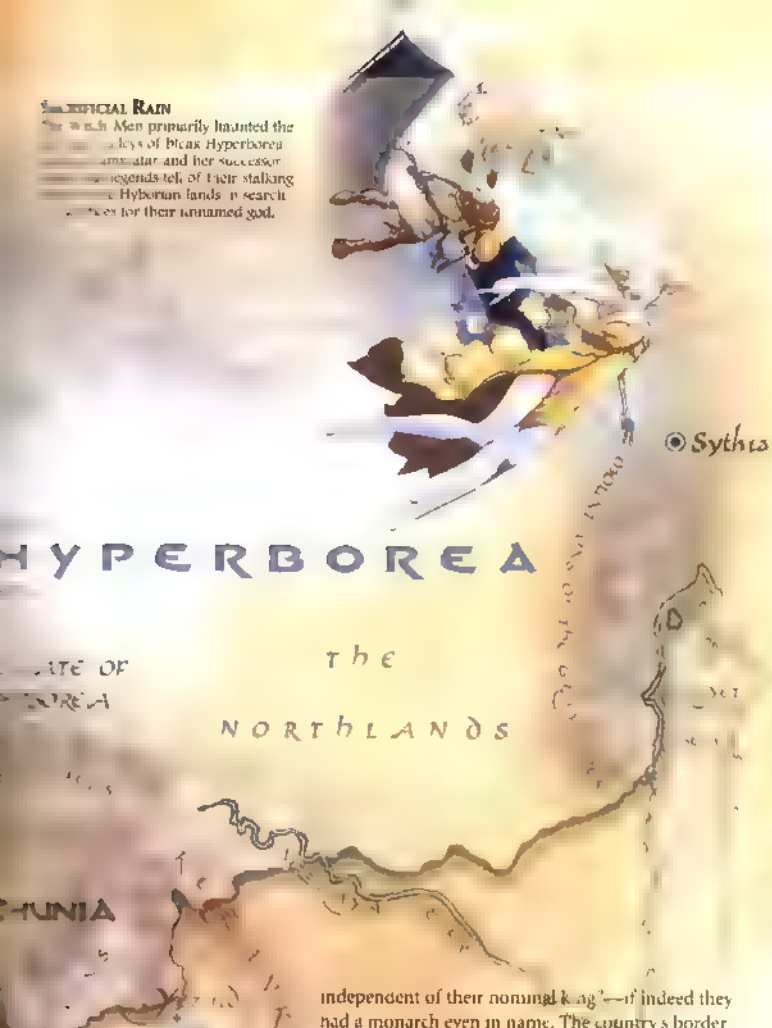
ASGARD

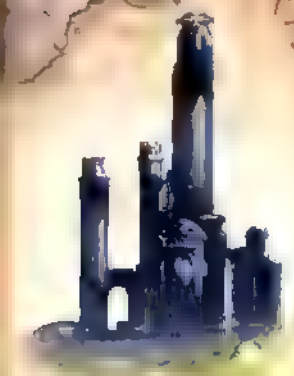
The land of the Aesir lay north and east of Cimmeria, beyond the ice-capped Eiglophian Mountains. Asgard, like Vanaheim, extended as far north as any man had ever roamed, into vast and inhospitable tundras. Like the Cimmerians, the blond Aesir were hunters and gatherers with no single king. Their chief god was Ymir the frost-giant, whom they shared with the Vanir. They relished battle, but only to loot and pillage, not as means of expanding their borders. Given their lack of agricultural knowledge and their disdain even for the herding of animals, they wouldn't have known what to do with conquered lands if they had them!

BRYTHUNIA

Little is known without dispute about Brythunia, which lay between Hyperborea and Zamora. Did its city-states comprise a loose-knit kingdom or perhaps a confederacy without so much as a capital city? Some scholars believe the lords of Brythunia were "thornily

Sacrificial Rain
The White Men primarily haunted the [illegible] valleys of bleak Hyperborea [illegible] Vammatar and her successor [illegible] legends tell of their stalking [illegible] Hyborian lands in search [illegible] even for their unnamed god.





Up from Savagery
Of the Hyperboreans rise, one ancient author wrote that they were "a race scarcely emerged from the polished stone age, who had by a freak of chance learned the first rude principles of architecture."

independent of their nominal king"—if indeed they had a monarch even in name. The country's border with witch haunted Hyperborea was marked by the Graaskal Mountains and the Frozen River, and Brythunians prayed that those twin guardians were sufficient to keep the gaunt devils of the White Hand on the other side of the border. As for resources, at least one Zamorian slave trader considered Brythunian maidens worth considerable risk to capture for his well-heeled clients to the south

THE BORDER KINGDOM

The Border Kingdom went Brythunia one better. It was composed of city states so loosely allied that they could never even decide on a proper name for their realm. The land seems to have been little more than a mere trade route, as opposed to a proper kingdom. In one account, it was described as a "dreary waste of desolate, empty moors," where "here and there gnarled and stunted trees grew sparsely." One later mapmaker postulated that much of the country was a "Great Salt Marsh," created by drainage from other nations.

QUEEN VAMMATAR & THE WITCH-MEN

Legends abound of Vammatar, Mistress of Castle Haloga in the far reaches of dark Hyperborea. Rumored to be centuries old, she ruled the cult of the White Hand, which was comprised of living men, if the stories are true, although their faces were always hidden behind featureless white masks. Their chief weapon was the Witch-Rod, which gave a shock like ivory lightning to any human with whom it came into contact. In later years, these gaunt terrors became known as "The White Hand," for when they touched human flesh, they left behind a pale and painful brand. These "Witch-Men" evoked terror among Vammatar's cowering masses, but she wanted more. Employing black magic to reanimate corpses, she created a Legion of the Dead to do her bidding. But despite her mastery of necromancy, she was human. When Conan was captured and brought before her, she became infatuated with the young Cimmerian and invited him to reign at her side. But Conan spurned her, and her infatuation quickly turned to hatred. It amused Vammatar to resurrect Conan's former comrade Njal, who had died alongside his men in the shadow of Castle Haloga, and command him to slay Conan and his own daughter. But in a river of flame and ice beneath her stronghold, the Cimmerian discovered the secret of making the walking dead fall again, and he used it to finally grant them the peace they deserved. Although his deed was noble, it came with a price: he was captured and tortured. Given his experiences in Hyperborea, is it any wonder that he was left with a lifelong hatred for that eerie land and its gaunt people?

Small wonder that the youthful Conan chose to pass through Brythunia, rather than the Border Kingdom, when he decided to journey south!

VANAHEIM

What set Vanaheim apart from these other northern lands was its coast. Interestingly, the Vanir never took to seafaring as did their Viking descendants. But the Vanir did establish villages along the Western Ocean and were even more warlike than the Aesir or the Cimmerians, both of whom they fought often and savagely. They would doubtless have clashed with the Picts as well, if the latter had not preferred to remain deep in their thick forests to the southwest.

HYPERBOREA

Separated from Asgard to the west by the River of Death Ice, the Hyperborea of Conan's day was ruled by wizards and witches, a group known as the White Hand. Its tall, gaunt lords and ladies tended toward white hair and emerald eyes. The lower classes could only look up from their huts and wonder what was occurring behind their Cyclopean walls, where lightning played about dark towers. But better not to ask what the White Hand were up to. Better to pray that no albino hand was ever laid upon your own shoulder!

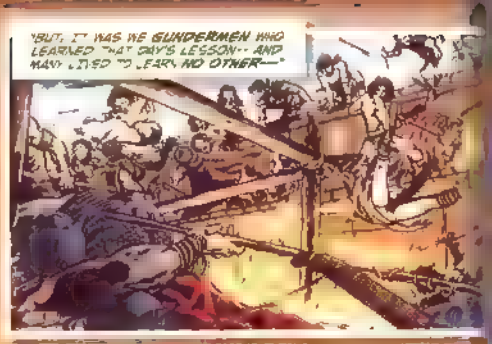
A More Worldly View
The Battle of Venarium was Conan's "baptism of blood," and witnessing the wealth from other lands being raided by the Gundermen must have filled him with the desire to see what lay south of the Bossonian Marches.

The Battle of Venarium

Proud Aquilonia had long lusted after the land beyond their northern provinces of Gunderland and the Bossonian Marches. When Conan was a child, Gundermen were sent across the borders to destroy a few small southern Cimmerian clans and build a fort town called Venarium. That settlement burned like a fiery cinder in every Cimmerian eye, and it was only a matter of time before they tried to pluck it out. Some far-sighted leader, whose name is lost to us, managed to unite the many clans of Cimmeria in that common cause. And then they waited.

Traders—or Spies?

Perhaps it is true, as some say, that young Conan visited Venarium once or twice in the company of older warriors. They told the colonizers that they were there to do a bit of trading—but their sojourns were, in reality, scouting expeditions. With piercing eyes and keen minds, they sized up the enemy. They found that, although the hardy Gundermen formed the backbone of the Aquilonian infantry, they were not the savage hand-to-hand fighters the Cimmerians were.



Welcome to Civilization
There is no undisputed record of when Conan got his first sight of civilized people. However it is known that he took part in the siege of the border city of Venarium when he was no older than fifteen.

Day of Reckoning

And then the Cimmerians struck! They swept out of the hills without warning—"like a ravening horde," according to one contemporary account—and "stormed Venarium with such fury none could stand before them." And Conan, by his own later telling, was "one of that horde that swarmed over the walls!"

All the inhabitants of the fort were put to sword or axe. The Aquilonians were driven back across the border, and never again tried to colonize Cimmerian country.

People of the Dark

One legend relates that, in the midst of the sack of Venarium, young Conan sought out a beautiful girl named Tamera. He hoped to make her his own and carry her back north with him. But it was not to be, for Tamera's heart belonged to another. Fleeing from Conan, she made the terrible mistake of wandering into a mysterious subterranean realm. There, she fell into the hands of the stunted, grotesque People of the Dark who dwelt there. Young Conan found himself unable to rescue her, and rather than yield to their loathsome caresses, Tamera leaped to her death from a great underground waterfall. If indeed this tale is true, then Conan returned north a bit sadder and wiser in other ways than those of war.

CONAN AMONG THE AESIR

Strangely, after getting a glimpse of the wonders of civilized world at the epic Battle of Venarium, Conan did not first roam southward—but north. In their usual manner, the clans of Cimmeria soon went their separate ways, abandoning the unity they had achieved to destroy the Aquilonian fortress. Before long, Conan found himself bored by the endless round of hunting, gathering, and palavering around the village fire that made up the life of his people.

NORTH TO ASGARD

He wandered first to Asgard, where by one account he proved his mettle by rescuing a young Aesir woman and her infant from a marauding Vanir. Sometime during this period, he joined a band of Aesir that was fighting with both the Vanir and the Hyperboreans. While fighting alongside his Aesir comrades, he honed his warrior's instincts, and his exploits during these months consisted mostly of raiding and pillaging. It is possible that the expedition he joined had set out with retribution as its goal—vengeance for some bloody act of the Vanir. Or perhaps it had formed as a rescue party intent on reclaiming several Aesir that the Hyperboreans had captured to use in abominable human sacrifices, back in their bleak homeland.

It mattered little to Conan. He fought—and he slew. For the time being, it was enough.

NJAL

An Aesir under whom Conan fought during this time, according to one account, was a *jarl* (chieftain) named Njal. Although reputed to be a fearless leader, he was known to be a bit testy when his decisions were challenged—but Conan was no yes-man, even in his youth! Brave Njal, alas, met a grim and grisly fate at the hands of the vile Hyperboreans.

NJORD

Njord was the leader of the band of Aesir that Conan joined during this first journey north. He was well beloved by those who followed him, because he tried never to leave a wounded warrior to the mercy of an enemy or the elements. It was he and his group who found the young Cimmerian, nearly frozen to death, after his encounter with the frost-giant's daughter.

THEN IT MAY BE THAT I AM MAD.
YOU YOURSELF ARE NO MORE REAL TO ME THAN WAS THE GOLDEN-LOCKED WITCH WHO FLED NAKED ACROSS THE SNOWS BEFORE ME
YET FROM UNDER MY VERY HANDS SHE VANISHED IN ICY FLAME.

A MIRAGE IN THE SNOW
When Njord and his band found Conan unconscious in the snow, they revived him. But when he awoke, he had a strange tale to tell.

PARTING WORDS
"Not in Vanaheim but in Valhalla will you tell your brothers that you met Conan of Cimmeria." Those were the last words that Heimdul, a member of the marauding band of Vanir, ever heard.

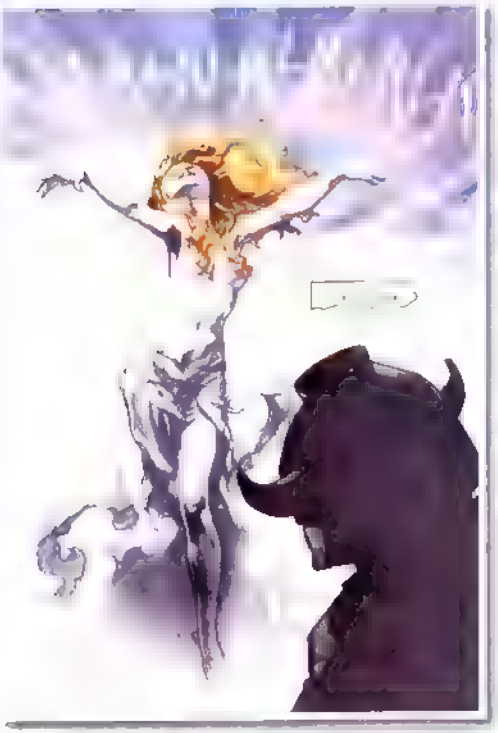
THE FROST-GIANT'S DAUGHTER

Wounded in combat with the Vanir called Heimdul, Conan collapsed in the snow somewhere in the borderland between Vanaheim and Asgard. Upon waking, he beheld a beautiful young woman wearing only a veil of thinnest gossamer against the bitter cold of the North. To him, she looked "like Dawn running naked on the snows." He asked her to lead him to her village, but she only laughed and ran away. And so he struggled to his feet and pursued her.

THE FROST-GIANTS

Were the towering, axe-wielding figures who barred Conan's way to the girl merely human warriors of gigantic stature? Or were they what they later seemed to him: frost-giants, those more-than-human denizens of the frozen wastes? Whatever they were, the fleeing beauty called them "brothers"—and Conan soon realized that with her laughter and taunts, she had deliberately led him to them. Standing before them, he knew at once that these behemoths meant to slay him.

But be they men or something more, they had never encountered anyone like the Cimmerian, whose terrible swift sword slew them both. Their monstrous corpses at his feet, Conan continued his pursuit of the girl.



THE ATLANTEAN SWORD

According to one legend, Conan discovered in an abandoned crypt, "A broadsword, made of blued iron. It might have been one of the first iron weapons borne by the hand of man: the legends of Conan's people remembered the days when men hewed and thrust with ruddy bronze, and the fabrication of iron was unknown." The tale goes on to say: "Many battles had this sword seen in the dim past, for its broad blade, although still keen, was notched in a score of places where, clanging, it had met other blades of sword and ax in the slash and parry of the melee . . . it was still a weapon to be feared."

A VISION IN WHITE

Conan knew not whether to trust his senses when the beautiful girl appeared to him. But as he pursued her, it was clear that his quest was for more than cool arms to shelter.

SO NEAR... AND YET...

Whatever else she was, the girl was flesh and blood—and Conan meant to have her. But she broke away from his embrace, leaving her frail garment in his hand. Sprawling at last in the snow, she flung her arms up to the glowing Northern Lights and cried: Ymir! O my father, save me!" The next moment, the sky crackled with icy fire, and she vanished in a blinding blue flame. Conan heard nothing but rolling thunder, a sound like that of "a gigantic war chariot, rushing behind steeds whose frantic hoofs struck lightning from the snows and echoes from the skies."

YMIR'S OFFSPRING

Niord and his Aesir came upon Conan, unconscious in the snow, and revived him. Gorm, the oldest said that once, when sorely wounded as a youth, he had seen the very girl Conan described. She was Atali, daughter of the god Ymir the frost-giant, and she derived perverse pleasure from showing herself to the dying. The others scoffed—until they saw in Conan's fist, "a wisp of gossamer that was never spun by human distaff."

THE FROST-GIANTS

From the Nemedian chronicles: "The land is covered with roots like the grinch of icebergs on the cold shore and heaves up their shining axes as the maddened sea heaves its hurled mass upon them."

After the Battle

"The clangor of the swords had died away. The slaughter was finished; silence lay on the red-spattered snow. Conan [illegible] and rode homeward.

The Mists of Time

Did Conan's encounter with Atali occur during his extreme youth, when he first adventured with the Aesir, who ranged far afield, battling Vanir and Hyperboreans alike? Or did it occur a few years later, when he had returned north briefly after his wanderings amid the civilized nations? Some have argued for the latter, since the account in the Nemedian Chronicles refers to "the palm and rose gardens of Pontain," which a very young Conan could not have seen. But it is the Chronicler, not Conan, who refers to that southern province of Aquilonia, thus, most scholars today number it among the young barbarian's earliest exploits.

This episode of Conan's life, alone of all recorded by Robert E. Howard himself, cannot be firmly placed in relation to others. But perhaps that is only fitting. For, surely, memories can be as fleeting as a tantalizing glimpse of the frost-giant's daughter.

The Thing in the Crypt

According to one legend, Conan, having been imprisoned in Hyperborea, managed to strangle his jailer and made a break southward. Taking refuge from wolves in an abandoned crypt, he lit a fire, which revealed a huge, nigh-skeletal humanoid figure seated upon a throne made of stone, a horned helmet on his skull, a naked sword across his knees. The sight nearly scared the 16-year-old Conan out of his superstitious wits! The Cimmerian had sore need of a weapon, but when he overcame his fear of the supernatural enough to heft the blade, the hulking cadaver rose and lumbered horrifically toward him. Even its own sword would not hurt this undead Thing. Only with fire did Conan manage to destroy the creature. Then, new sword in hand, he emerged into the night and "once more set his footsteps to southward."

CONAN

THE THIEF

To survive in the civilized lands, a young barbarian needed employment. But when Conan wandered south for the first time, he had no certain way of earning his daily bread—let alone a flagon of wine. Given his skill with a blade, some have asked why he didn't at once become a mercenary soldier—a "sellsword." And perhaps he would have done so, had the opportunity presented itself. On the other hand, he was brought up in a land where nothing short of an Aquilonian invasion could unite the tribes even briefly, so it is hard to picture Conan submitting to even a hint of military discipline at age 16 or 17. Perhaps the life of a thief was an inevitability, after all.

LARCENY IN THE HYBORIAN AGE

Every city, even the tiniest hamlet, had its thieves—whether light fingered pickpockets, swift-handed cutpurses, or armed robbers who depended as much on brute strength as on skill and stealth. But for most, the tools of the trade were as old as the profession. Pickpockets, if they didn't rely solely on lightness of touch (and fast legs to flee on), often wore arm slings to make potential victims believe they had an injured arm. "Cutpurses" did precisely that—using a very small (but very sharp!) knife held between their fingers. Far better to slice a hole in the side of a wealthy man's moneybag than to go rifling about in it, among coins that might jingle and jangle noisily. For climbing walls, grappling hooks were used.

Naturally, the more advanced thieves knew how to pick a lock—or at least how to cut through one with file and hacksaw. Either way, they would certainly have had to work as quickly as possible, while keeping an eye out for the nightwatch or a rich man's personal guardians, who, in the Hyborian Age, might not always have been human—or, strictly speaking, animal either.

A THIEF FROM CIMMERIA

According to scholars who have studied his career, Conan was, in his youth "more daring than adroit." Ironic, considering that some of his first thefts occurred in Zamora, a kingdom famous for the quality of its thievery. Small wonder, too, that it took the lad some time to earn a reputation among the older, more skillful worshippers of Bel, the Shemitish god of thieves.

In addition to his known exploits in Zamora's City of Thieves, certain legends tell of his other early attempts to transfer the wealth of others to his own pockets. It's said that he once relieved tax money from the vaults of a wizard called Zukala, then neglected to return it to the villagers, as promised. (A good decision, once the treacherous townsmen were planning to slay him when he brought back their money!)

This same source says that a young woman of easy virtue once persuaded Conan to have a sackful of ill-gotten gold recast into the shape of a heart. She then stole it from him while he slept—even though he had just saved her from an enormous bat. Some cynics, however, claim this tale is merely a parable, yet another literary depiction of the "the prostitute with a heart of gold."

Another legend states that Conan and a Gunderman comrade once looted a long-lost city, but were set upon by armored skeletons. And what few coins Conan managed to spirit away soon turned into venomous serpents inside his moneybags!

NEVER STEAL FROM A MAN OF GOD(S)

Conan and the Gunderman reunited in one city-state or another—it may have been in Corinthia—and, working together, they enjoyed a small degree of success, for a time. But then they made the fatal mistake of stealing from a fat priest of the god Anu. The full-fed man of the cloth was well known for being a fence for stolen articles and a spy for the local police. "He worked a thriving trade both ways, because the district on which he bordered was the Maze, a tangle of muddy, winding alleys and sordid dens, frequented by the boldest thieves in the kingdom."

For one reason or another, the priest betrayed the Gunderman to the police, and he was hanged in the market square. Even as a thief, the Cimmerian volunteer lived to his own barbarian code of honor, so he evened the score by stealing into the temple of Anu and beheading the cleric. Having matured a bit, Conan knew that friendship bore certain responsibilities—and that among those was vengeance for a comrade's life.

By the time he was 19, he'd moved beyond the thieving phase of his life. He had come a long way since he left the forested hills of Cimmeria, but he still had much farther to go.

On the Road of Kings

The Road of Kings, often spoken of in tales of Conan, passed through many of the major Hyborian kingdoms. Though it is uncertain whether this important trade route began in Khauran or in Turan, it is known that it wound through Zamora, Corinthia, and Nemedia on its serpentine way westward, finally traversing Aquilonia and Argos to the Western Ocean. It is doubtful that these oft-warring nation-states ever managed to cooperate in anything so peaceful as road-building. More likely, the route was an ancient one, predating the Hyborian kingdoms. Regardless of its origin, the Road of Kings is probably the reason that young Conan made his way to Nemedia, rather than to some other locale.

NEMEDIA

Of all the Hyborian lands, only Aquilonia might lay claim to being more powerful than Nemedia. Separated by a high mountain range, the two kingdoms waged war on each other, off and on, for several centuries. Yet there was a tradition of scholarship in Nemedia, which is underscored by the existence of the famous Nemedian Chronicles. The greatest Nemedian cities were Belverus, the capital, and Numalia. Its king during Conan's younger years was named Nimed. That monarch was murdered and succeeded by his brother Tarascus, who then warred with King Conan of Aquilonia. Few kings of the Hyborian Age died with their crowns still firmly on their heads, and those of Nemedia were no exception.

CORINTHIA

At least half Corinthia's territory was composed of mountains. That rugged geography led to isolation and certainly contributed to its ability to remain unconquered by even the most powerful empires. We do know that like Brythunia and the Border Kingdom in the North, Corinthia was a grouping of loosely allied city-states, but unfortunately, little other verifiable information has survived.

ZAMORA

Bordered on the east by the Kezankian Mountains and by lesser ranges to the south and west, Zamora was founded several thousand years before Conan's time. Its capital was the aptly named Shadizar the Wicked, although equally

Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery.

City of Surprises

Although Is actual name might have been Arenjun, to most it was known simply as the City of Thieves. The kind of place where 1,50 [illegible] lower night spirits, up overnight.

Numalia, the "Second City"
It was in Numalia, the second largest city in Nemedia, that Conan first encountered the Man-Serpent in a crypt of antiquities.

well known was its City of Thieves, whose actual name is sometimes given as Arenjun. The local police dared not set foot in the notorious district called the Maul, "where the thieves of the East held carnival by night." There, cutpurses, kidnappers, and killers rubbed elbows and amused each other with ribald yarns of extralegal derring-do.

Most mysterious and sinister of al Zamora's municipalities was Yezud, the City of the Spider-God, where—if legends are to be believed—an arachnid the size of an elephant was worshipped as a deity. Conan is said to have slain the creature, whose name was variously given as Omm or Zath. One of its vile priests survived and gained the ability to transform himself at will into a leopard-sized arachnid.

Shadizar the Wicked
Despite its intriguing epithet, little is known for certain about this Zamorian city. But if the legends are true, and nothing evil or immoral here "ought to" go unpunished, it's no wonder it's full of excess wealth!

Keep Invaders out—Keep Secrets in
Conan's overcome a lot of monsters, but it's likely the reason that the realm remained independent, even during the days of the empire of Acheron some 3,000 years before Conan's day, is also the reason we know so little about its people and customs.

TOWER OF THE ELEPHANT

The Tower of the Elephant, 150 feet tall, was erected in a single night by the captive alien Yag-Kosha at the command of the evil priest Yara. It was virtually a universe unto itself. The closer one came to its dark core, the weirder things became—until finally they were beyond all comprehension.

THE LIONS IN THE GARDEN

Two great lions roamed the walled gardens at the foot of the Tower. Yet there was something... strange... about them. Taurus the thief slew them with a mist formed of the black lotus from the lost jungles of Khitai, after which, Conan realized what was so strange about them. The lions had made no sound, which had made them all the deadlier

THE SPIDER THE SIZE OF A PIG

Inside the treasure chamber atop the Tower, Taurus found sudden death—in the poisonous bite of a huge spider. Conan himself barely evaded the monster, as its thick webs nearly snared him and stray drops of its venom seared his flesh. He hurled a heavy jewel chest at his attacker, crushing it against a wall and spilling gems out over the dying arachnid and its eight hairy, aimlessly thrashing legs.

ENCHANTMENT ABOUNDS

The great twin loci of magic in the Tower were Yag-Kosha and Yara himself. But when the mystical gem called the Heart of the Elephant vanished in a multicolored flash, so did both of those entities.

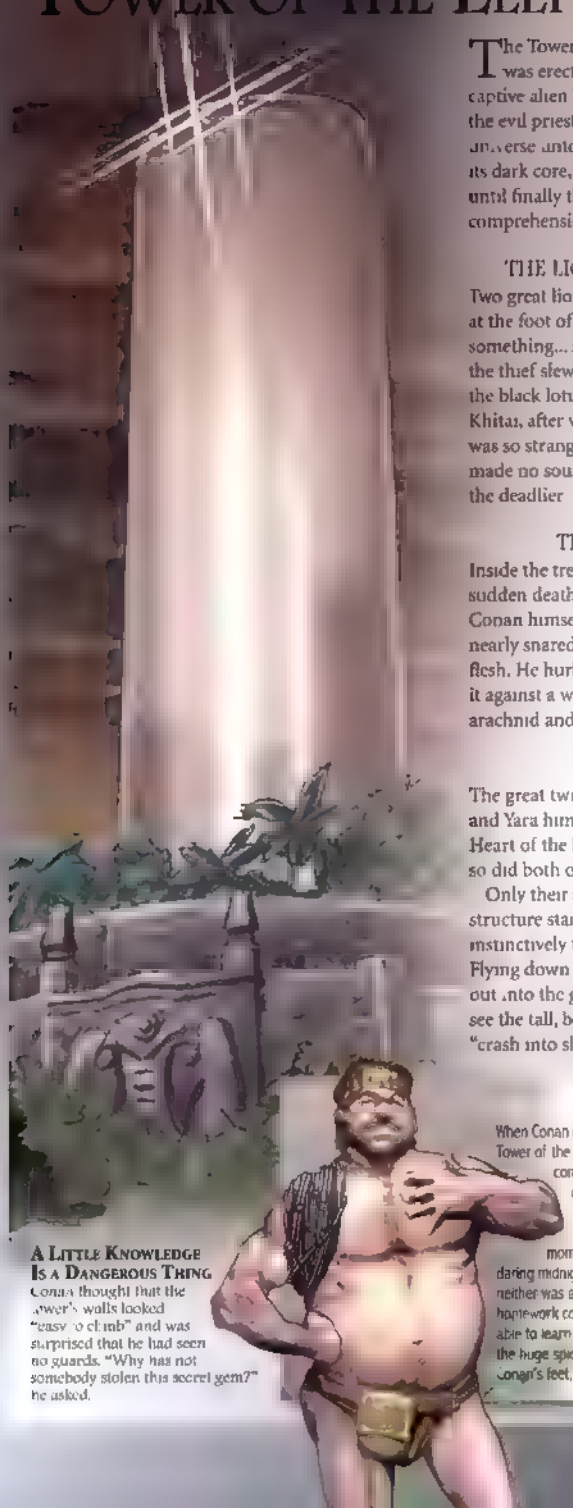
Only their sorcerous powers had kept the unearthly structure standing. With them gone, Conan knew instinctively that he had to flee the Tower at once. Flying down the winding stairs three at a time, he raced out into the gardens and looked back—just in time to see the tall, bejeweled tower sway in the dawn, then "crash into shining shards."

A BARBARIAN IN THE DAWN
As Conan turned back to look at the Tower, he wondered: "Was he bewitched and enchanted? Had he dreamed all that seemed to have passed?"

YARA THE SORCERER

Call him high priest or call him sorcerer—for years, Yara was the power behind the throne of Zamora. It was said that he worked strange dooms from his *sanctum sanctorum*, the ominous Tower of the Elephant that brooded above the City of Thieves. Small wonder that the king drank himself to sleep night after night, anxious to avoid thinking about how firmly Yara held him in thrall. According to a court page, Yara had once laughed in the face of a hostile prince, then held up a gleaming gem that shrank and transformed the nobleman to a garden-variety black spider, "which scampered wildly about the chamber until Yara set his heel on it."

Yara was rumored to be centuries old. And, according to the same whispers, he would never die, because of the magic of his gem Men called it the Heart of the Elephant, even though it resembled neither heart nor elephant. Perhaps he would have lived forever had it not been for a certain young Cimmerian, who rashly invaded his tower, setting in motion a chain of events that would culminate in the wizard-priest's terrible end at the hands of a creature he had long enslaved.



A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE IS A DANGEROUS THING
Conan thought that the tower's walls looked "easy to climb" and was surprised that he had seen no guards. "Why has not somebody stolen this secret gem?" he asked.

TAURUS THE THIEF

When Conan encountered Taurus of Nemedia on the grounds of the Tower of the Elephant by night, the Cimmerian paid him a great compliment "I've heard of you," he said. "Men call you a prince of thieves." Taurus' most prominent physical feature may have been his oversized belly, but that didn't slow either his swift movement or his quick mind. He liked Conan from the moment they met—and why not? Both men were attempting a daring midnight robbery in the midst of Zamora's City of Thieves, yet neither was a Zamonan. Unlike the young Cimmerian, Taurus had done his homework concerning Yara's foreboding tower But alas, he had only been able to learn what threats lay outside its walls. That didn't prepare him for the huge spider that guarded its highest chambers. Taurus died at Conan's feet, unable to speak, his hands clawing at his throat.

YAG-KOSHA

Before he met Yag-Kosha, Conan had wondered why Yara's stronghold was called the Tower of the Elephant—and why his magic gem was called the Heart of the Elephant.

But the moment he saw Yag-Kosha, seated like a living idol on a marble couch, he knew! For, although his body looked like a man's, green-skinned Yag-Kosha's head possessed wide flaring ears and a "curling proboscis, on either side of which stood white tusks tipped with round golden balls."

BEHOLD! THE LIVING IDOL
...ok never even seen an elephant ... would not have known that ... resembled the tusked ... rumors ... to have ... and, and ... other one in front

THE IDOL AWAKES
The last of a once-proud race, Yag-Kosha possessed power enough to build the Tower of the Elephant—but not to overcome the domination of Yara

"WE SWEPT THROUGH SPACE ON MIGHTY WINGS"

Yag-Kosha and others of his distant world had come to Earth untold eons ago, "from the green planet Yag, which circles forever in the outer fringe of this universe. Propelled by great wings they had traveled more swiftly than ... light itself, having been defeated and exiled by the kings of Yag. On Earth, their wings withered and fell off. The alien's words to Conan indicate that they came to Earth during the age of dinosaurs, and they had watched as man evolved from the ape to builders of great pre-Cataclysmic cities. His fellows gradually died over the millennia, until only Yag-Kosha was left, dwelling in half-collapsed temples in the jungles of Khitai, far to the east. Some say that his visage gave rise to the tales of the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesha.

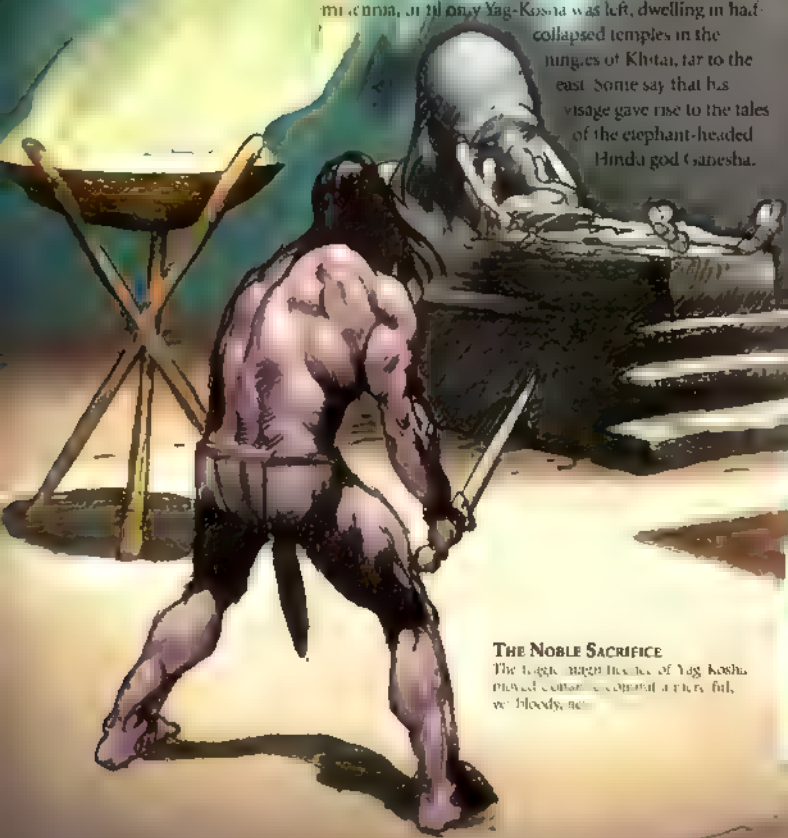
"THEN CAME YARA..."

Yag-Kosha was in chains when Conan found him. Three hundred years earlier, Yara had learned enough of his secrets to enslave him and bring him to Zamora. He tortured Yag-Kosha into submission and forced him to build a great tower by magic. The grotesque god-thing which Conan beheld did not move from his marble couch because he was mangled, broken, and blind—yet still he had to do Yara's foul bidding.

"A LAST GIFT AND A LAST ENCHANTMENT"

Conan was moved by the alien's plight. When asked to do so, he plunged his sword into Yag-Kosha's breast and pulled out his heart. He let its blood fall on the gem called the Heart of the Elephant, where it was absorbed as if by a sponge.

Then he sought out Yara, who lay in a drugged sleep, and placed the Heart of Yag before him, repeating the words he had been told to say: "Yag-Kosha gives you a last gift and a last enchantment." The horrified wizard began to shrink, and he was pulled into the gem. There, in that world within the jewel, Yara was pursued by Yag-Kosha, winged again and no longer blind or crippled. And then the jewel vanished in a rainbow flash. That was the last of Yara, who had sought to ... ster things that were meant only to be revered.



THE NOBLE SACRIFICE
The tragic, magnificent ... of Yag-Kosha proved ... elemental ... rich, full, ... bloody, act...

JANISSA

The woman warrior Janissa figures in one cycle of legends about Conan. And unlike myths, which are little more than fable and fancy, legends may well be true.

She was born the daughter of a wealthy Zingaran merchant, who planned to marry her off to a nobleman, thereby raising his own station. He did not bother to ask Janissa how she felt about being used as a pawn in a game of riches. If he had, he would have been chagrined, because she despised the notion of being bartered like a brood mare... however expensive.

So she fled and made her way into the wider world. There, in the hills, she encountered the sorceress called the Bone Woman, who promised Janissa the strength and skill that would make her the equal to or superior of any man. But there was to be a price: she must serve the seeress for a time equal to twice the length of her training.

A BRUTAL APPRENTICESHIP

The Bone Woman's method of training consisted of dragging Janissa with yellow lotus, then tossing her into a darksome pit where, despite the sword she'd been given, she was raped, night after night, by inhuman demons. But Janissa was made of stern stuff.

During the daylight hours, she honed her sword-skills and muscles as best she could—until one night she was finally able to kill one of the demons. Although she was assaulted by his surviving brothers, she knew she had won. The next night, she killed two of the demons before falling to their greater numbers.

It might have been years, even a decade, before she managed to slay them all and end her torment... but that night came, just as the Bone Woman had known it would. "And," Janissa told Conan, "I have served her ever since."

HER OWN WOMAN OR SOMEONE ELSE'S?

Janissa was a survivor. She was someone who took whatever vileness or pain the fate threw at her and not only endured it, but eventually triumphed over it. In that way she was much like Conan himself.

In other ways, however—in ways she did not begin to comprehend at first—she was as different from the Cimmerian as the night from the day. She had achieved her power by asking someone else, the Bone Woman, to give it to her—by accepting her terms, and then by serving her.

THE BONE WOMAN

The Bone Woman was the progenitor of Janissa's main strength, her sword skills. When she called her apprentice home, the girl had come. It was no accident that she knew her name when Janissa rode into her camp, lit by a roaring fire. But was Janissa destined to become the seer's greatest weapon? Or was the seeress merely a stepping stone to a greater and more sinister destiny?

MUCH TO LEARN

Conan knew that as long as Janissa acted in the service of her mentor, she was in truth a slave—merely a human sword wielded by the hand of another. But she was young. She would learn.

THE MAN~SERPENT

KALANTHES, PRIEST OF IBIS

... was a high priest of the bird-god ... and his name was at times given ... aranthes" or "Karanthes." ... ged ibis epresented what was ... us in Stygia ... wha ... here ... it at least. Under pain of ... the devotees of Ibis had long ... e been exiled from Stygia, which ... fallen under the thrall of Set and ... ark disciples. But while ... thes lived, he was a thorn in ... flesh of Thoth-amon and the ... k Ring... and they would never ... until he and his feathered god ... were no more.

Said to be a priceless relic found among the tombs far beneath the pyramids of Stygia, the sarcophagus was round, like a covered metal bowl, and adorned with hieroglyphics no Nemedian could read. Intended for the holy man Kalanthes in the city of Hanumar, the anonymous discoverer had dispatched it "because of the love which the sender bore the priest of Ibis." But it wound up in the house of antiquities in Numalia, thanks to a caravan master who couldn't be bothered to deliver it to its true destination.

BEHIND THE MASK

Within lay coiled a Man-Serpent, a gigantic constrictor with a human head of such Apollonic beauty that it resembled "the marble mask of a god." It betrayed no human emotion as it swayed hypnotically from side to side, its serpentine aspect hidden behind a gilded screen. It spoke but a single word, in an unknown tongue. Yet Conan knew what it meant: "Come!" Come—and die.

Conan leaped forward, severing that beauteous head from its unseen body. Only when dying coils lay writhing on the floor did he learn that the thing was partly man, mostly serpent—and wholly monstrous.

THE GOD IN THE BOWL

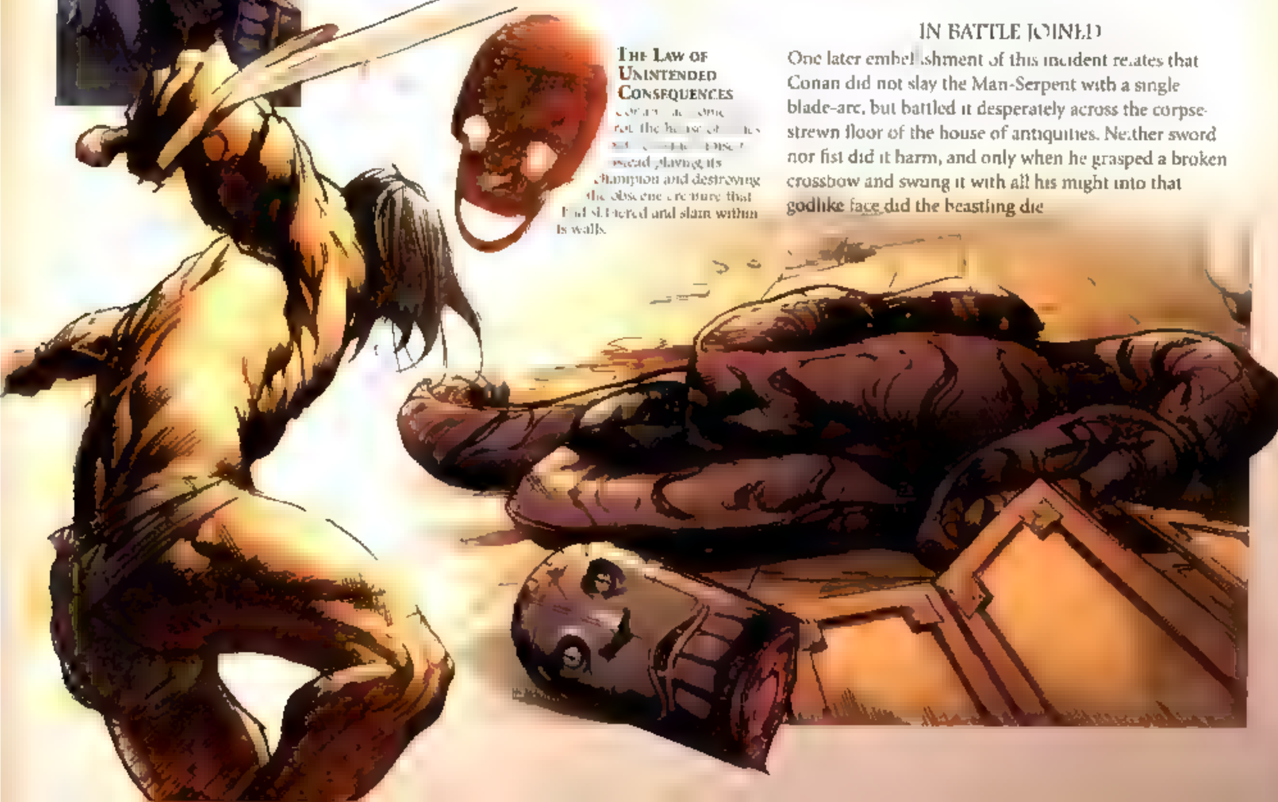
... the treacherous ... the lady Aztrias. The Man-Serpent ...

AND BEHIND THE CREATURE BEHIND THE MASK...

Loathing sorcery as he did, Conan fled into the night, caring not that the Man-Serpents of Stygia served the god Set. This attempt to kill Kalanthes was but one more skirmish in the millennia-long war between Set and Ibis, which had been waged since Earth's first dawn. Doubtless other such "children of Set" slept in the dark crypts beneath the pyramids. For the gods of eons past did not die as men die, but fell into long slumbers, until wakened by one steeped enough in sorcery to command them. And in this case Thoth-amon was that wizard.

IN BATTLE JOINED

One later embellishment of this incident relates that Conan did not slay the Man-Serpent with a single blade-arc, but battled it desperately across the corpse-strewn floor of the house of antiquities. Neither sword nor fist did it harm, and only when he grasped a broken crossbow and swung it with all his might into that godlike face did the beastling die.



THE LAW OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

... the house of ... instead, playing its champion and destroying the obscene creature that had slithered and slain within its walls.

THOTH-AMON OF THE RING

He was Conan's lifelong foe yet it's not certain the two of them ever met. He nearly caused the Cimmerian's death on at least two occasions, some three decades apart—but it's entirely possible that he and Conan never even knew of each other's existence.

Thoth-amon's sobriquet, "of the Ring," had a double meaning. He was a powerful figure in the Black Ring, the association of sorcerers that held sway in Stygia. And he wore the Serpent Ring of Set, the theft of which left him bereft of power and forced to pledge servitude to a northern master.

THE SHADOW OF THE FUTURE
In one rendering of the tale of The Man-[illegible] Conan got his first glimpse of [illegible] he saw [illegible] the empty interior of the [illegible] Thoth-amon had sent north.

KNOWN ENCOUNTERS

In Numalia, second city of Nemedia, Conan first came across the name "Thoth-amon." He found the mage's mark amid the hieroglyphics that covered the bowl-like sarcophagus that held the Man-Serpent, which nearly slew the youthful thief. That night, Conan learned that Thoth-amon was the deadly foe of the priest Kalanthes—but it is doubtful that the wizard, far off in Stygia, knew anything of the barbarian's existence.

The only other time their paths converged—for certain, at any rate—occurred during Conan's reign as King of Aquilonia. Unbeknownst to Conan, Thoth-amon made his way to Aquilonia's capital, disguised as a slave to the rebel Ascalante. But Thoth-amon regained the Serpent Ring and used its magic to send a dog-headed demon to kill his former master—"and all with him." At that moment, Ascalante was engaged in an attempt on King Conan's life, so that group included the Cimmerian. Conan slew the demon, but in all likelihood neither he nor Thoth-amon knew of each other's involvement in the night's grisly proceedings.

THE SEEDS OF CORRUPTION
According to one legend, a younger Thoth-amon's desire for the ring, and its power led him to the agents of Dark God Set. To appease his new master, Thoth-amon built an unholy altar and thus began his descent into evil.

Power and Vanity

[illegible] great sorcerer [illegible] the south[illegible] [illegible] of Thoth-amon [illegible] [illegible] Rammon Khem [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

JENNA

Her name may have been Jenna. Or it may have been... something else. No matter. Whatever she called herself, she is forever immortalized in the Nemedian Chronicles as the woman who betrayed Conan—and who, for that act, was dropped into the muck and mire by a man who might have been forgiven if he had slit her lying throat.

TREACHERY, THY NAME IS WOMAN!

After Conan avenged the death of his Gunderman friend by beheading the dishonest priest of Anu who turned him in to the authorities, the local constabulary were having no luck finding the killer amid the serpentine windings of the Maze.

Conan, meanwhile, had taken up with a certain blonde young woman and entrusted her with his secret. Perhaps it was wine that loosened his tongue. For when she led a squad of guardsmen to his hiding-place, the Cimmerian lay drunk within. Even so, he would have escaped, except that—in his half-dazed state—he missed the door and knocked himself unconscious against a stone wall. He awoke in the local dungeon.

The Road to Revenge
After escaping from captivity and recovering from the previous night's debauchery, Conan wasted no time in making his way to his betrayer's room to settle the score.

VENGEANCE IS SWEET

Escaping, he soon burst into the second-story room where the woman sat cross-legged in her shift. While she pleaded for her life, Conan wordlessly tucked her under his arm and stepped out of the window and onto a ledge. As she whimpered and writhed, he carried her a short distance to the edge—then dropped her with great accuracy into a cesspool.

As the Chronicler asserts, "He enjoyed her kickings and flounderings and the concentrated venom of her profanity for a few seconds, and even allowed himself a low rumble of laughter" before he wandered off to other endeavors in other lands.

Never let it be said that Cimmerians were without a sense of humor!

Shorn of His Helmet
In some legends, Conan came south wearing a horned helmet. But Jenna made him him remove it before he kissed her, saying, "It makes you look like a yak."

The Code of Conan
The treacherous Jenna feared for her life, not knowing that the young Cimmerian lived by a code that would not allow him to harm a woman. Humiliate, yes—but not harm.

AND HER LEGEND GROWS...

It was probably inevitable that other stories of various origin would spring up around this notorious blonde betrayer.

In these tales, it was that selfsame Jenna who, in Shadizar the Wicked, was rescued by Conan from a giant bat worshipped by a Zamorian cult. She repaid him by making off with such gold as he had accumulated to that point.

With it, she bought a Corinthian tavern—but who should wander in, ere long, but young Conan? Fate intervened, turning them both into fugitives from the law. On another occassion, Conan had to save her attractive hide again—this time from a blue-skinned, winged man of an ancient race who dwelt in a doorless temple of a lost valley.

Soon afterward, they reached the city-state wherein Jenna, finding herself attracted to another young thief, decided the easiest way to end her romance with Conan was to see him tossed into a dungeon. As it turned out, she was mistaken.

Other legends have Conan's and Jenna's paths crossing again from time to time in later years. But it was this first cycle of stories, the tale of her treachery and subsequent dousing in muck and mire, that became the stuff of legend.

Prince Murilo & Nabonidus the Red Priest

PRINCE MURILO

...on't be deceived by those scented black curls and that ...ppish apparel! Murilo, young aristocrat of a certain ...y state (which may or may not have been located in ...inthia) was no pushover when trouble arose ...aving bribed a court secretary in order to secure state ...ecrets, he in turn sold them to rival powers ...e felt no guilt about his actions. Life at court was ...xpensive, even for one who wore the title of "prince."

When Nabonidus the Red Priest threatened to expose ...s treason, which meant certain death at the king's ...nds, Murilo decided his tormenter must perish. What ...nduced him to hire as his assassin a youthful barbarian ...rom the dungeon, as opposed to some unfettered ...utthroat, is not known. But Conan was willing to do ...e job in exchange for his freedom.

However, due to unforeseen circumstances, Murilo ...cided he would have to sneak into Nabonidus' ward ...time and do the deed himself. That night, both he and ...onan were lucky to escape with their lives and their ...anities, intact. Even so, when dawn came, Murilo no ...nger had any living foes in the city, so he no doubt ...went back to his questionable ways after Conan left ...own on a fast horse.

NABONIDUS THE RED PRIEST

...onan never learned what gods Nabonidus served. ...ertainly the scarlet-robed priest did nothing ...suggesting religiosity during the few hours the ...barbarian knew him. When he discovered Murilo was ...pilfering state secrets, Nabonidus did not report him ...to the king. Instead, he cut off the ear of ...the nobleman's accomplice, as a ...warning to Murilo to get out of ...town. Doubtless he knew of ways ...he could benefit by his rival's absence. He was a clever ...man, this Red Priest, in his fortress house festooned ...with mirrors that enabled him to spy on events ...happening several chambers away.

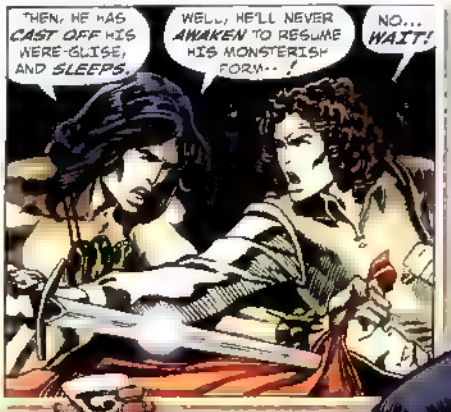
A ROGUE IN RED

But Nabonidus had sewn the seeds of his own destruction when he brought the savage creature called Thak back to civilization. Thak overthrew his master, and only Conan's stark ferocity and iron constitution saved them all.

Unfortunately, the Red Priest refused to remain saved. Once the Cimmerian had served his purpose, Nabonidus tried to dump him and Murilo into a vat of acid beneath the floor. Conan proved he could hurl a sword with as much accuracy as a dagger, and he learned he was right. Nabonidus' blood was indeed as red as his robes.

The Crimson Company

Some tales say that Murilo and Conan joined forces again later, after Murilo formed a band of mercenary soldiers called the Crimson Company. They sold their swords indiscriminately to one Ophirean city or another, just as their leader once sold royal secrets to the highest bidder. Although it is unknown whether these later tales are fact or fable, descriptions of the likable scoundrel are consistent with those of the Murilo Conan had known at nineteen.

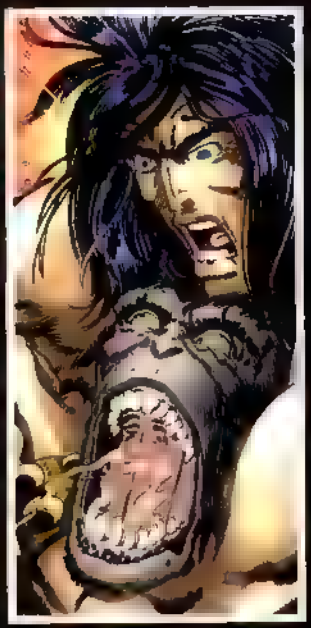


When Old Friends Get Together

...r a later legend that may or may not be true, Conan and Muri... met again and became embroiled in the battle ...twixt Shadow and Scorpion. Two horrors from the days of King Kull.

To a Short Life... And a Merry One

During his days as a soldier, ... fortune ... one ... rarely found Conan without a flagon before him and a comely wench at hand.



Man vs. Beast
From the Nemedian Chronicles: "Conan was fighting like a wild beast himself, in silence except for his gasps of effort."

Thak

Nabonidus told Conan and Murilo that some would call Thak an ape—but he was as different from a true ape as from a true man. His species dwelt in high-inaccessible mountains on the eastern fringes of Zamora. They knew nothing of fire or the making of clothing, shelter, or weapons. Yet they had "a language of sorts, consisting mainly of grunts and clicks."

The Red Priest had brought Thak back to his city-state when he was a "cub." The man-beast had demonstrated superior intelligence and soon became Nabonidus' servant and bodyguard. Yet within his breast smoldered lingering hatreds "and some sort of bestial ambition of its own." And then one night, after years of waiting and planning, Thak struck, and he overthrew his master. Stripping the unconscious Nabonides of his crimson gown, Thak made himself the lord of the great walled manor.

MASTER OF THE HOUSE

As master, Thak slew Nabonidus' man-servant and watchdog. And, in his own way, he guarded the house well. That selfsame night, when a thief named Petreus brought his gang stealing over the walls, Thak could have ripped them all limb from limb with his brute strength. Instead, he pulled at a velvet rope designed by

Rogues in Red
When the bestial Thak took over Nabonidus' house, he took over his crimson cloak as well, which, before the night was over, would be stained with the scarlet blood of Conan or Thak... or both.

Thak: A Mirror's-Eye View
"Some would call him an ape, but he is almost as different from a real ape as he is different from a real man." —from the Nemedian Chronicles

Nabonidus, which triggered the release of a thick glass panel and what was known as "clouds of doom," which was, in truth, "the dust of the gray lotus, from the Swamps of the Dead, beyond the land of Khitai." The poison mist drove Petreus and his men mad, and they slew each other with daggers and teeth. Watching from some distance away by means of his mirror arrangement, Nabonidus was impressed that Thak remembered all he had seen his former master do.

MAN VS. MAN-BEAST

In a bid to win his freedom, Nabonidus contrived a desperate plan that, of course, called for much dangerous action from Murilo and Conan. Murilo drew Thak to a certain spot, and the Cimmerian leaped onto his back, locking his legs around the ape-man's torso and stabbing at it with his poniard.

But, powerful as he was, Conan's strength was no match for Thak's. Inexorably, the creature began to drag the barbarian around in front of him, where he could tear him apart. Murilo managed to stun Thak for an instant with a blow from a chair, which gave Conan the moment he needed to plunge his blade into Thak's heart.

Even then—sorely wounded, and having taken enough punishment to kill a dozen men—Conan impatiently shook off Murilo's offer of support.

"When I cannot stand alone, it will be time to die," he snarled. "But I'd like a flagon of wine."

ISPARANA

One of the legend cycles that has grown up about Conan concerns the thief woman Isparana, the sorcerer Hisarr Zul, and Zamora's City of Thieves.

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

For a woman to be a successful thief in a City of Thieves, she has to be good. Very good. And Isparana of Zamboula was. Of course, it didn't hurt that she was also a mean hand with the curved blade that was her weapon of choice.

She first encountered the teenage Conan one night in Zamora, while breaking into the house of the sorcerer Hisarr Zul to steal a talisman called the Eye of Erlik. Each of them planned to recover the prize and return it for a considerable reward to the Khan of Zamboula, from whom it had been stolen a decade earlier.

For a time the magical prize eluded them both, and the Cimmerian left her in the care of a Turanian captain.

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Not long afterward, the paths of Isparana and Conan crossed again, this time in the middle of the desert. On this occasion, the larceny in their hearts was temporarily eclipsed by the lust in their young bodies, and they later worked together to recover the Eye of Erlik and return it to Zamboula's ruler. Perhaps Isparana was the real winner of that contest, though. For she was soon ensconced as the young Khan's new lover— "the first woman of Zamboula." After that, she vanishes from tales of the Hyborian Age.

THE WENCH OR THE WIZARD?
Was it Hissar Zul who posed the greater danger to Conan — or was it Isparana of the curved blade?

FLASHING EYES, FLASHING BLADES
When a man fought a duel with a vision like Isparana, how can he keep his mind on the scimitar she wielded like a scythe?

HISARR ZUL

Legend has the mage Hisarr Zul dwelling in a great walled house in Zamora's City of Thieves. Here he was served by walking dead men — one of whom was his own brother. Having stolen the Eye of Erlik from Zamboula's Khan, Hisarr Zul planned to use its magic against its original owner. But his greatest theft occurred the night Conan came to his abode to steal the Eye. He entrapped the barbarian's soul in a mystic mirror and forced him to pursue Isparana. At one point, Conan regained the talisman single-handedly, but when he went to turn it over to Hisarr Zul, the wizard tried to sell him with the powder of the yellow lotus. Conan blew the dust back into his face — just as the sorcerer's dead brother had told him to do — and he escaped. Soon afterward, he regained his captured soul and gave the wizard death in exchange. He considered it a fair trade.

CONAN

THE MERCENARY

During his various adventures as a starveling thief in Zamora and elsewhere, Conan gained his first tastes of professional fighting and Hyborian intrigue. And he found that he rather enjoyed them both. When he reached his early 20s, he decided it was time to find a new and more promising career. He would become a soldier of fortune or a mercenary soldier—a "sellsword," in the parlance of the times.

A SOLDIERLY SOJOURN IN TURAN

The exotic eastern kingdom of Turan was, at this time, in the process of acquiring an empire that would rival even Aquilonia and Nemedia. Such a goal required men to spearhead the banners, and according to several usually reliable sources, Conan served in the army of Turan for a spell. The circumstances under which he signed up, however, are murky, at best. One account says that while passing through Turan's capital of Aghrapur, he was given a choice: join King Yildiz's finest or be tossed into the royal dungeon. He chose the military life as the lesser of two evils.

WEAPONS OF WAR

Up to this point, Conan had depended on his own wits, along with his natural talent for swordplay and knife-wielding, to get him out of tight spots. But soldiering day by day with professional soldiers, some of whom had studied weaponry all their lives, soon convinced him he should broaden his basic skills. It is not known whether there was some particular master of blades who honed his inborn abilities, or whether he simply watched and learned.

Up to this point, he had scorned the bow and arrow as a weapon of cowards, the instrument of men who feared to come into close contact with an enemy. But he was impressed by the Hyrkanian horse archers, who formed an important branch of the Turanian cavalry and who could loose their arrows with great accuracy while thundering full-out on the back of a charging stallion. Soon Conan was a master of the bow, whether on foot or on horseback.

FAREWELL TO TURAN

Precisely when and why he resigned is unknown, but one account states that his desertion from Turan's military involved the wife of his cavalry commander. Be that as it may, Conan soon rode westward again, having heard that there were wars plenty in the offing back in the Hyborian lands.

SWORDS FOR SALE

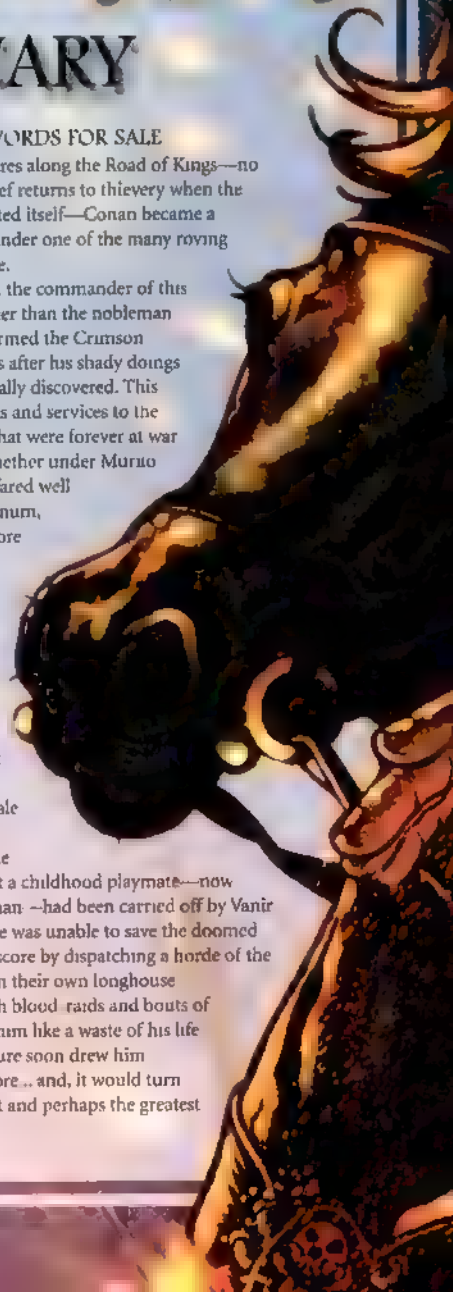
After many adventures along the Road of Kings—no doubt including brief returns to thievery when the opportunity presented itself—Conan became a mercenary soldier under one of the many roving generals of that time.

It is even said that the commander of this group was none other than the nobleman Murilo, who had formed the Crimson Company—perhaps after his shady doings back home were finally discovered. This outfit sold its swords and services to the various city-states that were forever at war with each other. Whether under Murilo or another, Conan fared well during this interregnum, and learned ever more about the art of civilized warfare.

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

During a lull in the wars, he returned for a short time to his native Cimmeria. In one tale that is told around certain campfires, he arrived to learn that a childhood playmate—now a lovely young woman—had been carried off by Vanir raiders. Although he was unable to save the doomed lass, he evened the score by dispatching a horde of the red-haired rogues in their own longhouse.

But suddenly such blood raids and bouts of revenge seemed to him like a waste of his life. His love for adventure soon drew him southward once more... and, it would turn out, toward the first and perhaps the greatest love of his life.



On the Shores of the Inland Sea

In the long-forgotten Hyborian Age, when the great basin that would one day be the Mediterranean Sea was all flatlands and mountains, the greatest body of water between the Western Ocean and whatever vast body of water might lie beyond the distant East was the Vilayet Sea. On its eastern shores were the Hyrkanians, and on the western were their offshoots, the Turanians.

TURAN

The Turanians were descended from the Hyrkanians of an earlier eon, and they sometimes even referred to themselves as "Hyrkanians." In truth, they were the lords of their own great empire, which was destined to grow even greater in Conan's day. The kingdom boasted a large, powerful navy and several huge cities that ringed the western shore of the Sea. Skilled Turanian seamen aboard their famed war-galleys had made the Vilayet a "Turanian lake," in the vernacular of the day.

Turan's influence extended over most of the Hyrkanian heartland to the east, and its armies conquered many of the desert cities to the south, such as Zamboula, which had been established by Stygians. During Conan's lifetime, Turan was beginning to look westward, as well—casting dark, covetous eyes at the tempting farmlands and wealthy metropolises of Zamora, Shem, and the Hyborian kingdoms.

THE VILAYET SEA

The "Inland Sea," as it was often known in the Hyborian Age, was both a barrier to and a catalyst for the relations between its two major coastal nations, Hyrkania and Turan. The sea itself was perhaps 300 miles across at its widest point, and some 2,000 miles long. To any except

No Safe Harbor
Scattered with isles populated by savage peoples and carnivorous gray apes that dwarfed the gorillas of a later era, the Vilayet was no place for the faint of heart—a designation rarely applied to Conan the Cimmerian.

RIDERS OF RENOWN
From nomadic Hyrkanian tribes came the fabled mounted warriors and horse-archers that bolstered Turan's armies

the great vessels of Turan, it might as well have been an endless ocean, dotted with mostly uninhabited islands. But those isles that were not without life were home to a wide range of horrors and inhuman entities of a bygone day.

HYRKANIA

The Hyrkanians were the descendants of the Lemurians, who fled to land when their chain of islands sank during the Great Cataclysm. Eventually freeing themselves from enslavement in far eastern Khitai, they moved westward and gradually dominated the steppes on the eastern shore of the Vilayet Sea.

In Conan's day, Hyrkania was less a kingdom than a region in which isolated city states held sway, separated from their neighbors by steppe, forest, desert, and even tundra. Although many of these city-states were dominated by the empire of Turan, others retained their autonomy, at least for a time—perhaps by trading with and paying tribute to the acquisitive kings in Aghrapur across the water. Some nomadic Hyrkanian tribes dwelt far from the sea and thus Turan's powerful navy. These often refused even to acknowledge Turan's existence.

YEZDIGERD

Intriguingly, only tantalizing glimpses of Yezdigerd have come down to us by means of the Nemedian scholars. He never appears onstage in the Chronicles themselves, which merely identify him as the king of Turan—probably the successor to Yildiz. Many considered the bearded Yezdigerd to be the mightiest king in the world. His palace in Aghrapur was heaped with the world's plunder, thanks to tribute paid him by Zamora and the eastern provinces of Koth and Shem. His armies ravaged the borders of Stygia and Hyperborea, of Brythunia and Ophir and Corinthia, and even of Nemedia.

It is known that at one time, King Yezdigerd, hoping to add Vendhya to his holdings, sent emissaries to hatch a scheme with the sinister seers of the Black Circle. When Conan's kozaki and piratical Red Brotherhood raided the southern city of Khawarizm, the lord of the city shook in his boots for fear that Yezdigerd would depose him for not adequately guarding the empire's frontiers.

Yet surely, there was much more to know about the one who was called "The Grand Monarch".

A PRINCE BEFORE HE WAS A KING

Legends abound of the younger Yezdigerd, then a prince of Turan—and not necessarily the one thought most likely to inherit the throne. One of the most celebrated concerns his leading an armada of purple-sailed ships to besiege Makkalet, an Hyrkanian city on the Vilayet's eastern shore. Ostensibly, the purpose of this expedition was to restore the man-god called "the Living Tarim" to the temple in Aghrapur... but some feel the young prince wanted Makkalet's wealth as well.

A MOVABLE THRONE

In tales of the Siege of Makkalet, likewise known as the War of the Tarim, Yezdigerd crossed the Inland Sea in search of glory and gold. He found both—though not without cost.

SETTLING OLD SCORES

Surely one of the most intriguing aspects of this legend is Conan's part in it. It is said Yezdigerd's flagship picked up Conan and his comrade Fafnir in the middle of the Inland Sea, and that they joined his forces. This tale, if true, provides an additional reason for Yezdigerd's enmity toward the Cimmerian. For, in it, a furious Conan later gutted a Turanian officer—and when Yezdigerd drew his own sword, Conan fought him, leaving the future sovereign a wicked scar that he would wear to the end of his days.

Was the enmity between Yezdigerd and Conan only that between a king and an outlaw—or was it something more personal? Only the lost portions of the Nemedian Chronicles might provide the answer, if ever they are found.

FAFNIR

In one cycle of legends, red-haired Fafnir wandered far from his native Vanaheim to captain a pirate ship on the Vilayet Sea. He and the Cimmerian became comrades after they were washed ashore on the isle of Bar-Sagoth. When it sank by magic, they were rescued by Yezdigerd. But, wounded in battle during the first assault on Makkalet, Fafnir's axe-arm had to be amputated—and a Turanian threw him overboard to drown, as extra baggage. Conan, of course, slew his executioner.

Some hold that Fafnir survived, and even gained a demon arm which often warred with his better nature and forced him to do deeds best forgotten. Yet always, he and Conan were loyal to each other despite the Cimmerian's dislike of Vanir in general.

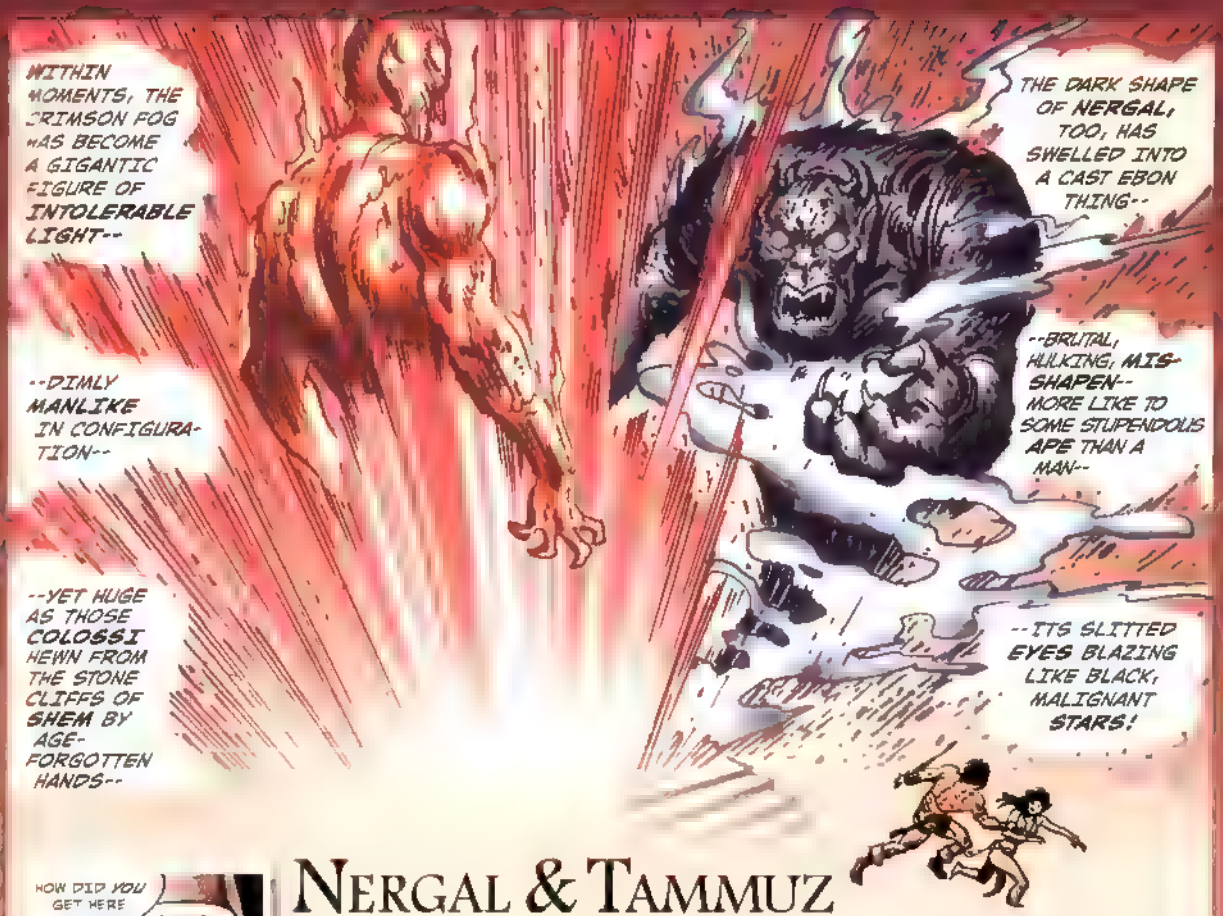
KING YILDIZ

In the Nemedian Chronicles, Yildiz is little more than a name, a king who was rumored to keep a massive treasure horde. But if some later scholars are to be believed, Prince Yezdigerd's conquest of Makkalet did not lead to his becoming sovereign of the growing Turanian Empire any time soon.

In these accounts, his father Yildiz ruled in Aghrapur for another decade—and, unknowingly, even employed in his service the very man who had given Yezdigerd a lifelong scar! Furthermore, it is said in some circles that Yildiz was reviewing his palace guard one day when Conan returned from a mission for the Crown, hell-bent for leather and wounded in a dozen places. So impressed was Yildiz that he elevated the Cimmerian to membership in his honor guard. When a statue from a conquered Hyrkanian city came to life to menace the king, Conan managed to negate the sorcery that made it walk before it could assassinate Yildiz.

A LEGEND IN HIS OWN TIME

If certain legends be sooth, Yezdigerd—first as prince, then as king—was the Genghis Khan, the Attila, the Tamerlane of his day, and perhaps greater than all those conquerors joined together.


WITHIN MOMENTS, THE CRIMSON FOG WAS BECOME A GIGANTIC FIGURE OF INTOLERABLE LIGHT--
--DIMLY MANLIKE IN CONFIGURATION--
--YET HUGE AS THOSE COLOSSI HEWN FROM THE STONE CLIFFS OF SHEM BY AGE-FORGOTTEN HANDS--
THE DARK SHAPE OF NERGAL, TOO, HAS SWELLED INTO A CAST EBON THING--
--BRUTAL, HULKING, MIS-SHAPEN-- MORE LIKE TO SOME STUPENDOUS APE THAN A MAN--
--ITS SLITTED EYES BLAZING LIKE BLACK, MALIGNANT STARS!

HOW DID YOU GET HERE GIRL?
I AWOKE TO FIND THE MASTER'S CHAMBER EMPTY-- SO I GLAZED INTO HIS CRYSTAL.
SEEING YOU HERE I FOLLOWED AND CHANCED ALL ON A TRY FOR THE HEART..!
LUCKY FOR US THAT YOU DID! I
CONAN! LOOK!!

NERGAL & TAMMUZ

Nergal, darksome demon, and Tammuz, gleaming god. Since time out of mind, they had been foes, waging war in the space between the worlds. Yet their final battle was destined to be played out on the stage that is the Earth, while mere mortals watched in wide-eyed awe.

REVOLT IN YARALET

In the northern Turanian city of Yaralet, Munthassem Khan was striving to throw off the yoke of Aghrapur. Once, he had been the gentlest of satraps. But that was before a caravan from Stygia had brought him the Hand of Nergal—a clawed talisman that filled him with an insatiable lust for power, and mystic abilities to achieve that power.

Only the amulet called the Heart of Tammuz could defeat the Hand of Nergal. As fate would have it, Conan stumbled upon the Heart of Tammuz while serving in an armed Turanian force that had been sent to quell Munthassem Khan's revolt. Wearing the talisman, only he survived when they were attacked by giant shadowy bats that slew all in their path, yet whom no sword could touch.

THE HEART AGAINST THE HAND

Although Conan had thought the Heart set to be destroyed, he was surprised [illegible] conversations would be more [illegible] sectarians.

COSMIC FORCES UNLEASHED

In the satrap's palace, Hand and Heart came into close proximity for the first time in eons, and colossal figures emerged from them. One was Nergal—brutal, hulking, misshapen—and the other was Tammuz—manlike, formed of intolerably bright light. They came together with a roar like that of colliding worlds, and Nergal was dissolved by the all-pervading brightness. Then Tammuz, too, faded. Sadly, nothing was left of the hapless Munthassem Khan, save smoldering ashes.

The philosopher Atalis pronounced the final word: "The Heart is ever stronger than the Hand."

JUMA THE BLACK

In legends that are not found in the Nemedian Chronicles, a dark-skinned warrior named Juma wandered north to seek his fortune as a soldier for Turan. Attired in a practical fur hat, which he later lost in battle, and a golden bangle in one ear, he boasted a smile that was his most dazzling feature. Enough teeth to take a bite out of the heavens

UP FROM SLAVERY

When Juma was a child slave raiders dragged him from the lush jungles of kush to the slave markets of Shem, where he labored for years on a farm. When he was fully grown and powerful of stature he was sold as a gladiator to the arenas of Argos. Through victories in the games, he eventually won his freedom. For a time, he made his way as a thief, later drifting over to Turan, where his fighting abilities earned him a coveted post in King Yildiz's Royal Guard.

Small wonder he and Conan got along from the first the bronze-skinned barbarian from the north, and the ebony-skinned barbarian from the south. Neither was an easy fit in the army of Aghrapur. And yet, despite their strong comradeship, only two tales are told of their exploits—or is it in truth one tale, seen through the eyes of two different tellers?

THE CURSE OF THE GOLDEN SKULL

In one tale, a Turanian troop that included the two barbarians was escorting Yolinda, daughter of Yezdigerd (and granddaughter of Yildiz), back home from the northern Convent of the Sacred Heart of Tarim, when it was attacked. Conan, Juma, and Yolinda were taken to the hidden domain of Rotath, a gold skeletoned wizard from pre-Cataclysmic days. The two men were put to work mining gold, half of which was used to placate the voracious appetite of a gigantic worm thing. They broke free only to find themselves pursued by the worm. They led it straight to Rotath, whose golden bones became a repast for the creature. This version of the tale differs from that of Zosara, in that Conan and Juma brought the damsel safely home and there was no dallying along the way

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

[illegible]

THE CITY OF SKULLS

While escorting Yildiz's daughter Zosara through the Talakma Mountains to her wedding with a nomad khan, the Turanian troop that included Conan and Juma was attacked by small armored men. Their captors planned to wed Zosara to Jalung Thongpa, master of Shamballah, the City of Skulls, in the fabled land called Meru. But Conan and Juma overcame the many-armed incarnation of Yama the Demon King, rescued Zosara and delivered her to her groom intact—more or less. Actually, she was pregnant with Conan's child but what the nomad khan didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

CONAN IN CAPTIVITY

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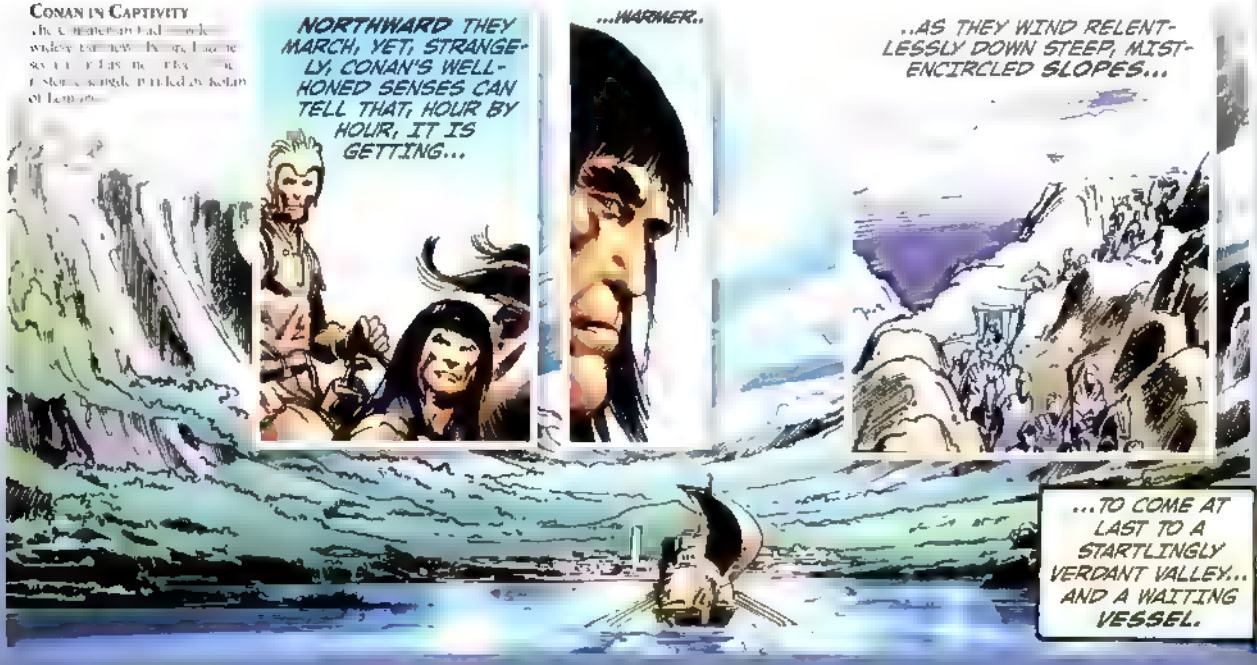

NORTHWARD THEY MARCH, YET, STRANGELY, CONAN'S WELL-HONED SENSES CAN TELL THAT, HOUR BY HOUR, IT IS GETTING...
...WARMER..
...AS THEY WIND RELENTLESSLY DOWN STEEP, MIST-ENCIRCLED SLOPES...
...TO COME AT LAST TO A STARTLINGLY VERDANT VALLEY... AND A WAITING VESSEL.

The Monster of the Monolith

Perhaps some parts of the story Duke Feng told Conan that night were true. He spoke of Hsia, an ancient king of Kusan, whose tomb lay near their camp beneath a great monolith. He said that Hsia had beheaded his entire war guard so their spirits would guard it, that gold and jewels were buried at the foot of the column. Whether such tales were true or not, all that mattered to Feng was persuading Conan to accompany him to that secluded spot alone—and in a metal chestplate.

The top of the monolith was wreathed in mist, but when Conan began to dig near its base, he was startled to find himself drawn irresistibly to it. It was a huge magnet that pulled inexorably at his metal armor and held him fast. The mist above dissipated as Feng played on a curious pipe. Conan beheld an amorphous horror squatting atop the monolith—a thing resembling a huge lump of quivering, semitranslucent jelly—and it lived. As it began to ooze down the column in response to the piping, Conan could smell the repulsive digestive fluids it would use to absorb him into its own abominable being.

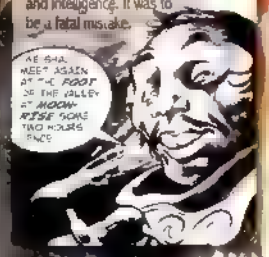
ANIMAL MAGNETISM

Fortunately, already held fast to the monolith was a time-eaten dagger. With desperate exertions, Conan managed to use it to cut the leathern thongs that bound together the front and back of his chestplate. Free again, he tossed the screaming Feng at the descending monstrosity and watched it flush pink as it dissolved the Khitan's flesh. Only after it had done its grisly work did Conan torch the creature, and it squirmed in voiceless agony as it perished. Conan then continued on his mission to deliver the treaty from King Shulo to Aghrapur.

A Substance Superb for Picking Bones Clean
"The [illegible] contained a digestive fluid, by which the unfortunate is preyed" from "One of the Legends of Conan"

Duke Feng

There was something Conan did not like about this high noble of the court of Kusan, a minor kingdom in western Khitai. Feng was thin, dainty, foppish with soft, long-nailed hands and a liquid, purring voice. He wore fantastical silken garments and perfume—not characteristics likely to endear him to the Cimmerian. But King Yildiz had sent Conan east to Kusan's ruler with an offer of friendship and trade. And King Shu had replied in the affirmative, handing Conan a gorgeous scroll of gilded silk. However unknown to them both, Feng belonged to a group called the Golden Pheasant, which abominated all association by Kusan with "the barbarians of the west." He concocted an ingenious plan to do away with Yildiz's emissary, although he underestimated Conan's strength and intelligence. It was to be a fatal mistake.



The Demons of the Summit

In the legend cycle, Conan rose in the Turanian ranks to a position corresponding to sergeant, whereupon Yildiz ordered him to escort an emissary to the restless tribesmen of the Khozgari Hills, hoping to dissuade them from plundering the Turanians of the lowlands. But the Khozgarians were warlike barbarians—Conan would have recognized the type—who had no intention of bending the knee to Aghrapur. They treacherously attacked the detachment, killing all but Conan and another soldier.

APE-MEN AND OTHER HORRORS

With Shanya, the tribal chief's daughter, as a hostage, the pair attempted to escape across the Misty Mountains through the Shambar Pass. Before long, Conan's comrade was killed by an apelike creature, and Conan was forced to rescue Shanya from the black-clad, cadaverlike People of the Summit. Their swords were easily dispatched, but with his dying breath their leader unleashed the Ancient One—a ten-limbed, arachnid horror.

Conan's sword broke on its horny hide, forcing him to retreat up a pile of great round stones. In desperation, he hurled several down at his pursuer, and—thanks to the power of forgotten spells chanted over the graves of long-dead chieftains—an avalanche carried the monster away into a yawning abyss. After this, Shanya accompanied Conan willingly, to keep him safe from further Khozgarian attacks.

THE REMORA, BY ANY OTHER NAME. . .

Some reports say that, after absenting himself from the Turanian service, Conan returned for a short time to Cimmeria. But whispers of war soon drew him south again. In the Eiglophian Mountains, he rode his stallion over the Snow Devil Glacier, the reputed home to a creature whose likeness none had ever returned home to describe. After he rescued Ilga, a young woman of the Virunian tribe, from a hairy, man-eating tribesman, they made love in a sheltering cavern and he forgot about the legends of the creature.

When he awoke, Ilga was gone. Finding her remains, his blood boiled. He realized too late that what some called the Snow Devil—and the girl had called Yakhmar—was actually the grim Remora, the vampiric Ice Worm of Cimmerian myth.

He could have fled and avoided a confrontation, but he held himself responsible for her death. After dispatching the beast and narrowly escaping the ensuing avalanche, he was glad to turn his bruised face toward the golden South, where shining cities lifted tall towers to a balmy sun.

The Ice Worm

When she awoke, Ilga was instantly mesmerized by two mysterious disks of green fire that gleamed from an interior ice tunnel. She passed them like someone in a dream and never returned. Conan sought her out but found only her bones and those of his stallion, all covered by glistening green slime. When the Remora revealed itself to him, Conan hurled both his axe and a helmet full of burning coals into the maw of the coiling, gargantuan thing. As it writhing shook loose the snows, and the glacier exploded, killing it.

Native Wisdom

Conan still ignored the warnings of Shanya, the Khozgarian, who spoke of a superstitious dread that lurked in the Shambar Pass, home to the People of the Summit.

I'M CONAN, FROM CIMMERIA--FAR TO THE FROZEN NORTH OF HERE.
THE GIRL ON THAT SLAB IS MY HOSTAGE--AND I'VE COME BACK TO TAKE HER BACK!
YOU LIE! TO THE NORTH IS NOTHING BUT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD--AND ETERNAL NIGHT!
THE GIRL IS OURS, TO BREED US STRONG SONS--
-- WHILE YOUR BODY SHALL FEED THE MAW OF THE ANCIENT!

THE TRAIL OF THE BLOODSTAINED GOD

Throughout the years, Zamora's City of Thieves always seemed to draw Conan back to the scene of his earliest exploits in the civilized lands. It was there, in a dark and pungent alleyway, that Conan rescued a Kezankian tribesman named Sassan from torturers who were on the trail of the treasure of the Bloodstained God. As it happened, so was the Cimmerian—but thieves had stolen his map. Well, what had he expected, in a city full of men dedicated to the art of thievery?

So the two men joined forces and raced Sassan's tormenters to Zamora's eastern border. The leader of the torturers was Keraspa, a Kezankian chieftain who would stop at nothing to gain the treasure.

THE TEMPLE

Standing on a cliff amid the Kezankian Mountains was a pre-Cataclysmic temple that had been carved out of the sheer rock. By the time Conan and Sassan reached it, they had been forced to make an alliance of convenience with the Corinthian Zyras, one of the thieves who had stolen the Cimmerian's own map.

A narrow ledge led to the temple's huge bronzen door which was green with age. Conan cared little what ancient, forgotten race had reared it. He knew only that fabulous riches were rumored to await them inside.

But the temple was a maelstrom of traps. When over-eager Sassan pulled at projections on its portal that looked like hinges, the great door fell forward upon him like a massive drawbridge. He was crushed him like an insect beneath a ton of bronze.

THE BLOODSTAINED GOD

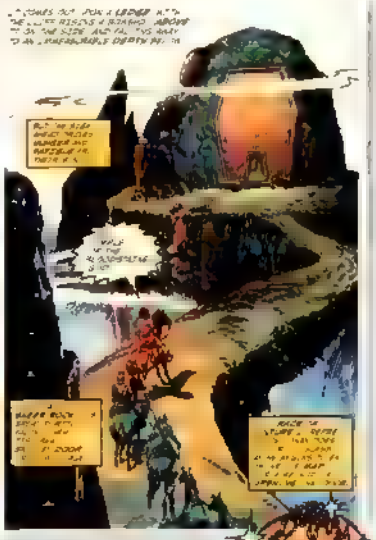
Within, they found the god. It was an idol, slightly larger than a man, made of gold, and crusted with precious gems—rubies, mother-of-pearl, and more. Unmoving, it loomed before them as Zyras tried to stab Conan in the back. The Cimmerian avoided his treacherous thrust and fought Zyras, slaying him in the shadow of the idol.

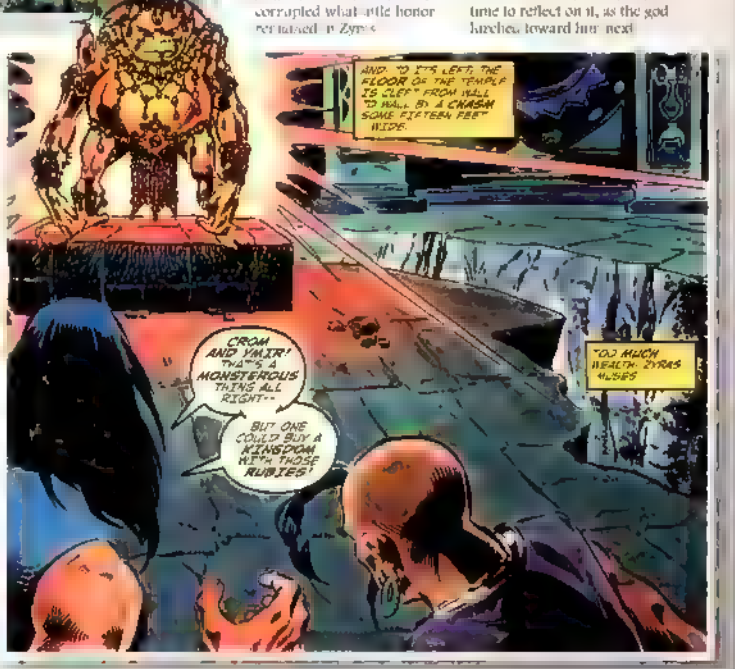
Untold wealth seemed at last to be within Conan's grasp—when suddenly, Keraspa appeared, aiming a deadly arrow at the barbarian's broad back. At that moment, the jewel-encrusted god stepped down from its pedestal with a heavy metallic sound and sent Keraspa to his doom.

FAREWELL TO ALL THAT

Conan knocked the god's head off with a heavy brazier, hoping to blind it. But it needed no eyes or ears to sense its prey, and it continued to lumber unerringly toward him. Yet the Cimmerian caught the stalking hulk off-balance and managed to send it careening down into the same crevice into which it had hurled Keraspa. The curse of the Bloodstained God was ended—and the god with it.

Unfortunately, since all the jewels had been appended to the living idol itself, riches the thieves had sought passed beyond all reclaiming. Well, Conan decided, one day he would find other treasures ripe for the taking... maybe even one without a curse on it!




AND, TO ITS LEFT, THE FLOOR OF THE TEMPLE IS CLEFT FROM WALL TO WALL BY A CHASM SOME FIFTEEN FEET WIDE.
CROM AND YAJIR! THAT'S A MONSTEROUS THING ALL RIGHT--
BUT ONE COULD BUY A KINGDOM WITH THOSE RUBIES!
TOO MUCH WEALTH! ZYRAS MUSES

KERASPA

Just before he delivered an arrow into Conan's back, the luminous idol—the Bloodstained God himself—came to life. Keraspa's arrows rebounded off it like twigs thrown by a child, and the god hoisted Keraspa over its head and hurled the murderous Kezankian chieftain down into the yawning abyss which some long-past earthquake had made in the temple floor.

"TOO MUCH WEALTH..."

Sassan's hunger for wealth brought him death on the very doorstep of the treasure, while the fabulous riches of the idol corrupted what little honor remained in Zyras.

WRATH OF A GOD

Conan knew not what caused the god to awaken and slay Keraspa the moment before the chieftain shot him in the back, but he had little time to reflect on it, as the god lurched toward him next.

CONAN

CORSAIR OF THE BLACK COAST

I must go down to the sea again..." So wrote the English poet John Masefield.. and Conan, twelve millennia earlier, would have understood. At several different points in his life, the Cimmerian became a seafarer—almost always outside the laws of nations. Call him pirate, buccaneer, or corsair, he often sailed in search of plunder and adventure.

SEA CHANGE

Conan was about twenty-four when the Road of Kings led him at last to Messantia, the major seaport of Argos. At the time, he had no intention of going to sea, but fate forced his hand. Hailed into court, he was ordered by an insolent judge to reveal the whereabouts of a comrade who had run afoul of the law. When he explained that he could not betray his friend, the judge threatened to toss him into a dungeon. At this point, Conan decided "they were all mad," and cleft the judge's skull with his sword. (And, while we may question allowing the barbarian to wear a sword into the courtroom, we should also consider what would have happened to anyone who tried to take it from him.)

Realizing he was now persona non grata in Messantia, Conan commandeered the nearest horse and galloped for the wharfs. There, he hopped aboard a merchant vessel just pulling away from the docks and at swordpoint ordered its captain, a man named Tito, not to turn back. Thus did Conan of landlocked Cimmeria go to sea for the first time aboard the *Argus*.

FIRST MEETING—FIRST MATE

Along the so-called Black Coast, the crew of the *Argus*, which now included the young barbarian, beheld the smoking ruins of villages and ebony corpses. One sunrise, they were attacked and boarded by the black corsairs from the *Tigress*, a pirate galley commanded by Bêlit, the self-styled "Queen of the Black Coast." Tito and all his crewmen died in the assault. Even Conan, shearing heads from shoulders while himself protected by armor, would have fallen to the sea of spears surrounding him—if the she-pirate herself had not intervened. On an impulse, she made the fierce Cimmerian her first mate—in more ways than one—and he entered a new phase of his ever-colorful life.

THE RAGE OF THE *TIGRESS*

For the next three years, Conan sailed with Bêlit as her ship ranged the seas, mostly between Stygia and the southernmost tip of the Black Coast. The villagers shuddered, aware that at any moment they might fall prey to pirates of their own race. Survivors of raided Stygian ships cursed both captain and first mate. But the Queen of the Black Coast and her barbarian mate were undaunted. As the Chronicles say, "Heedless as a vagrant wind, the *Tigress* cruised the southern coasts. . ."

All Is Mystery

The Black Coast was the name given to the lands that bordered on the Western Ocean south of priest-ridden Stygia. It was doubtless called that originally because of its fierce, dark skinned inhabitants. But it earned its name twice over by remaining a region of which little was known, as if all light and knowledge were swallowed up as soon as one moved from those palm-lined shores into the somber vastness of the interior.

THE BLACK COAST

The earliest and most authentic maps of the Hyborian Age do not even list the names of the "nations" that comprised the Black Coast. Although it seems certain that the most northerly one was named Kush, the others were perhaps not truly kingdoms at all, but simply collections of isolated tribal lands. South of the Zarkheba River, all is mystery.

Even so, there is ample evidence suggesting that the tribes traded and communicated with each other, both on the Black Coast and further inland. During those few years that the white she-pirate Bêlit and her savage crew ranged those waters, drums beat out a voiceless warning to those further south that the she-devil buccaneer was headed their way. The villages trembled even before the sails of the dreaded *Tigress* hove into view, her decks swarming with warriors and bristling with spears.

After Bêlit's reign came to an end, the denizens of these southern climes were content to have little contact with each other or with northerners. And given their unfortunate experiences, who can blame them?

KUSH

The country called Kush, the capital of which has at times been given as "Meroe," was comprised mostly of villages along the shore of the Western Ocean. Plunging a few miles inland, careless travelers would have encountered first a band of almost impenetrable (although not uninhabited) rain forest, followed by a broad savanna, which was bordered on the east by hills. Those in Kush who thought about things counted the Southern Desert, which lay beyond those hills, as part of their kingdom, but the supposed "kings" of the land exercised no control over the vast wasteland.

Hail to the Queen

It is unknown whether Kush or one of the other lands of the Black Coast ever had a [illegible] but it is said that the [illegible] called [illegible] the Queen of the Black Coast."

Kush... But Only in Name

Kush was the northernmost of the black kingdoms located to the south of Stygia. But because the Hyborians knew so little of the black lands, they often used the term "kush" to refer to all of them indiscriminately. That would have included the countries of Darfar, Keshan, Punt, Zembabwei, and perhaps others.

AMRA

During Conan's days of sailing the waters of the Black Coast with Bêlit, he gained the name "Amra," which means "the lion." Its origins are uncertain, although the Nemedian Chronicles do give us a hint "Tom-toms beat in the night, with a tale that the she-devil of the sea had found a mate, an iron man whose wrath was as that of a wounded lion."

Less substantiated legends tell of an earlier "Amra." This crimson-haired jungle man was said to be the son of an Aquilonian nobleman. Having been raised among the great felines, he had become "Lord of the Lions" and had dared try to force himself upon Bêlit. Conan killed him in hand to hand combat.

Two decades later, Conan's deeds were still remembered by the people of the region, although few knew that the "Amra" of their legends was the same north-born barbarian who was then sitting upon the throne of Aquilonia.

LEGENDS OF AMRA AND BÊLIT

There exist few hard facts concerning Conan's sojourn with Bêlit, but many yarns have been spun. There are tales of tribesman of the interior riding the backs of great crocodiles known as "river dragons," and of huge falcons being ridden by men of Harakht, the mythical "Hawk City" located somewhere on the River Styx. Ballads are sung of Kelka, the time-lost "city in the storm," and of an isle ruled by the Lord of the Feathered Serpent. It is even said that, at one point, Conan and Bêlit stormed King Ctesphon's palace, located in the Stygian capital at Luxur, and that they ran afoul of Thoth-amon's murderous Man-Serpents.

BEHIND THE LEGENDS

One thing verified by the Nemedian Chronicles is that it was during this period that Conan first encountered the scrawled symbol that he would come to know as the Sign of Jhebbal Sag. This powerful sigil could control the actions of wild beasts. Some say that one of Jhebbal Sag's votaries, Ajaga by name, crowned himself the "Beast King of the Black Coast" and, leading an army of animals from the jungle, briefly carved himself an empire.

It is also known that Bêlit occasionally traded with Argossean merchants, perhaps sneaking into Messantia by night to do so. Once, she, Conan, and the corsairs burned the "black walls" of Khemi, Stygia's major seaport — although it is unclear whether those "black walls" were the city's sea walls or its dark prowed ships.

LION KING

Conan [illegible] as Amra for the several years [illegible] which he ruled the Black Coast with Bêlit, who was, to put it mildly, rather taken with him from the very beginning.

TO THE VICTOR GO THE SPOILS

According to legend, after Conan killed the man known as Amra, he took over both his name and the great lion that had been his jungle companion. [illegible] brother.

Bêlit, Queen of the Black Coast

She was the shapely yet formidable captain of the black corsairs, fierce pirates from the land of the Southern Isles. The Nemedian Chronicles state that she felt an overwhelming love—or was it only lust?—for Conan from the instant she set eyes on him, as he mowed down her men on the decks of the doomed *Argus*. Rather than see him pinioned with their spears, she ordered them to stand back, for she had never seen his like. Impulsively, she invited him to journey with her "to the ends of the earth and the ends of the sea." She was Queen of the Black Coast—and he would be her king.

A Mystery Spawned in Shem

Although she and Conan ranged the Western Ocean and its southern shores together for perhaps 1,000 days and nights, she was a mystery and an anomaly even to the Chroniclers. It is known that she was Shemite by birth and that she believed the Shemitish deities Ishtar, Ashtoreth, Derketo, and Adonis to be the greatest of gods. She even nurtured an affection for Bel, god of thieves.

Yet who was she, really?

Scholars of the Chronicles argue amongst themselves about her origins. She claimed that her "fathers were kings of Asgalun," the most important seaport of pastoral Shem, but some believe the legend that says she was the only child of a King Atrahis, who was killed by his usurping brother Nim-Karrak in league with the Stygians. In these accounts, little Bêlit's tutor N'Yaga, an exile from islands south of Kush, fled with her back to his homeland. There, he convinced his superstitious fellow tribesmen that she was the daughter of the goddess Derketa, who was perhaps a sister and consort to Derketo, and that her coming fulfilled an ancient prophecy.

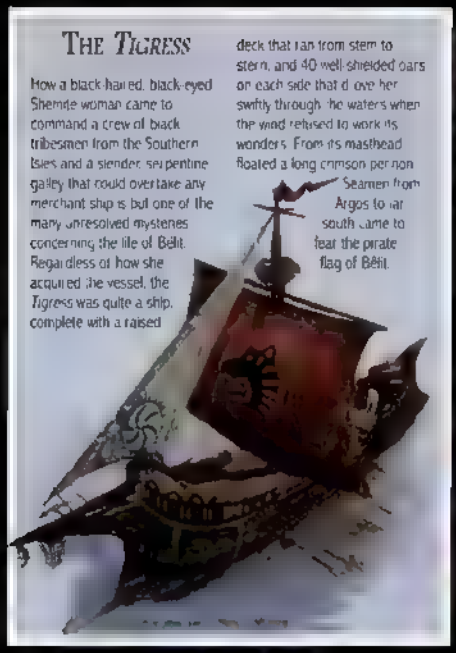
As she grew, she gained skill with bow, dagger, and spear, and attained the rank of warrior by battling subterranean Mound-Dwellers. She used her newfound prestige to convince the men of the Southern Isles to take up piracy. According to this cycle, she and Conan later overthrew Nim-Karrak in Asgalun, after which Bêlit

A Leader of Men

For years she enjoyed the loyalty of her corsairs—yet, at the lost city on the River Zarkheba, she callously allowed four of her crew to die in what she suspected was a trap set by its ancient builders.

The Mating Dance of Bêlit

After Conan accepted her offer and boarded her ship, Bêlit tore off her scant garments, and upon the bloodstained deck she danced what she termed "the Mating Dance of Bêlit, whose fathers were kings of Asgalun."



The *Tigress*

How a black-haired, black-eyed Shemite woman came to command a crew of black tribesmen from the Southern Isles and a slender, serpentine galley that could overtake any merchant ship is but one of the many unresolved mysteries concerning the life of Bêlit. Regardless of how she acquired the vessel, the *Tigress* was quite a ship, complete with a raised deck that ran from stem to stern, and 40 well-shielded oars on each side that drove her swiftly through the waters when the wind refused to work its wonders. From its masthead floated a long crimson pennon. Seamen from Argos to the south came to fear the pirate flag of Bêlit.

claimed her father's throne, then immediately renounced it—for, having avenged his murder, she now wanted no crown beyond the one worn by the crashing waves off the Black Coast.

ANOTHER SONG OF THE SHE-PIRATE

According to another account, she was not royal-born at all, but the daughter of a Shemite trader who brought his young wife south among the Suba tribe, where she gave birth to Bêlit and her older brother Jehanan. In this version, Bêlit wed a man of Shem, returned south, and gave birth to a son. But Stygian slave-raiders killed her family, then sold her and her brother into slavery. Years later, at Conan's side, she got her revenge, but she retained forever a hatred for Stygia that passed all forgiving—and they returned the feeling.

OTHER LEGENDS

Separating fact from fiction in the life of Bêlit is even more difficult, perhaps, than in that of Conan. For if one discounts the legends, all that is left is her position as captain of the black corsairs, much feared along the shores of the Western Ocean, until the day she died.

But perhaps at least some, if not all, of the tales told of her piratical exploits with Conan are true. Perhaps the two of them did fight alongside a flame-tressed swordwoman against a nameless acolyte of the Stygian god Set... and even encountered, amid a mist of displaced time, the fabled King Kull of Valusia. Perhaps she really did save Conan from the Beast-King Ajaga. And perhaps it was his love for her that gave the Cimmerian the strength to resist the mesmerizing blue-skinned Sea-Woman when he was near to drowning. Perhaps... perhaps....

N'YAGA

N'Yaga first appears in the saga after the pitched battle aboard the now-sunken *Argus*. He was a shaman who dressed Conan's wounds and later spotted the winged ape that was soon to be their doom. "Better we had cut our throats," he said of their course upon the River Zarkheba, "than come to this place." Yet his prescience did not spare him from the fate of his fellow corsairs soon afterward. Little is said of N'Yaga in the Chronicles, but the many stories told by later scribes describe him as a wise counselor "a man of science" (one in his own words, "as well as a witch doctor."

OF LOVE... AND OTHER EMOTIONS

Was Bêlit really what some scholars have called her, "the first great love" of Conan's life? Or was their relationship only a thing born of convenience, at least on the barbarian's part?

After all, had he spurned her offer of love and partnership that day on the deck of the *Argus*, he would likely have been peppered with spears and tossed to the sharks. Although the Chroniclers say that he not only recognized the lust in her eyes, but felt the same emotion in his own blood, was there ever truly love between them?

Of Conan and the afterlife, Bêlit is quoted as having said that her love was stronger than death:

"Were I still in death and you fighting for life, I would come back from the abyss to aid you—aye, whether my spirit floated from the purple sails on the crystal sea of paradise, or writhed in the molten flames of Hell! I am yours, and all the gods and their eternities shall not sever us!"

The fulfillment of that prophecy following her tragic death would seem to validate their feelings for one another, after three years of sailing and fighting side by side.

N'GORA

N'Gora—whose name is given as N'Gora in some later legends—was a "sub-chief" among the black corsairs, a near-giant of a man. When the crew of the *Tigress* explored the dense jungles that flanked the River Zarkheba, first mate Conan suspected that they were being followed, so he ordered N'Gora to march ahead until he was out of sight. He never saw N'Gora again—at least not as a sentient human being.

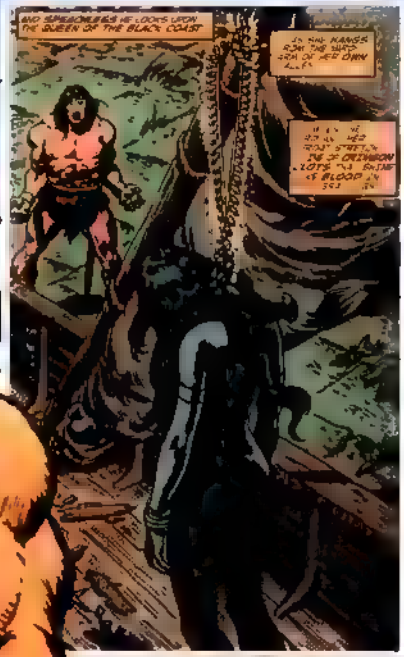
Only minutes later, after he awoke from a black lotus dream, Conan was attacked by N'Gora, his long arms dangling and froth dripping from his lips. His skin crawling with horror, the barbarian had no choice but to slay his comrade in arms, who had been driven mad by the poisoned river. In one legend cycle, N'Gora is less of a giant, but a more important figure. Still, nothing could save him from his dire, sad fate and Conan's reluctant sword.

The Death of Bêlit & the Vengeance of Conan

Natives of the region shunned the dark, poisonous waters of the River Zarkheba, which were said to be inhabited only by "venomous reptiles." The pirate queen Bêlit was not ignorant of its reputation when she ordered the *Tigress* to sail up the broad, fallen river in search of a lost city and its treasure. Conan, who was generally happy just to carry out her ideas, went along with that plan—to his regret.

"THE GHOST OF A CITY"

As they approached the half fallen, vine-covered towers of the lost city, they saw a monstrous ape fly off into the jungle on broad wings. Enraptured by greed, Bêlit stared in wide-eyed wonder at the horde of precious gems in the crypt beneath a booby-trapped altar. But, while she directed the corsairs in retrieving the treasure, the wingless apes raided the ship's water casks. Conan and 20 men left in search of fresh


AND SUBSCRIBERS KNOWS UPON THE QUEEN OF THE BLACK COAST
IN THE HANDS OF THE WISE MEN OF HER OWN
THE SPIDERMEN LOTS OF BLOOD IN

She was of the Sea
For three years, she had lent it splendor and fire in his eyes. With her gone, the sea "reeked a barren, desolate, and dreary waste from pole to pole."

Black Water's Curse

The poisoned waters caused a profound and intelligent race to mutate into savage winged apes.

...ngle water. The last he saw ... ve, she seemed ...zed, her fingers toying ... a necklace of crimson ...nes that resembled "clots ... zen blood strung on a ... gold wire."

BLACK LOTUS'S DREAM AND A WAKING NIGHTMARE

...d the trees, Conan fell ...p under the influence of ...ck lotus. He dreamed of a ... of superior winged beings, who had reared that city ... ong ago day. But then fertile meadows became ... swamp and jungle and a black substance from ...terranean depths poisoned the water, turning the ...gs into mere winged apes. In this dream, Conan ...n beheld himself arriving in the *Tigress*—and saw ...s corsair comrades fleeing the lone surviving winged ...pe, only to fall to their deaths over a cliff.

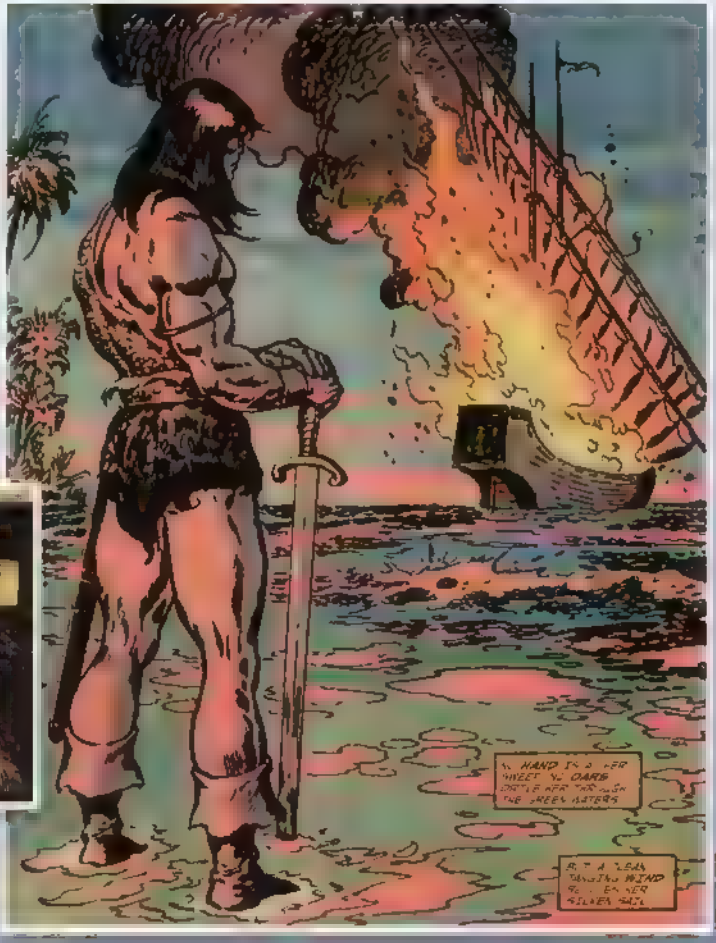
Waking with a dread premonition, Conan raced back ... the ship. There, amid the pawprints of hyenas, lay the ...alf-devoured corpses of the other corsairs. There, too ... hfeless form of Bêlit was hanged from the yardarm ...w the string of crimson stones she had placed about ...er own neck, only a few hours earlier.

THE VENGEANCE OF CONAN

Conan let the dead lie where they had fallen ... save for Bêlit, whom he gave what burial he saw fit. Afterwards, on a pyramid in the city, the Cimmerian awaited his foes' return. When two-score huge hyenas approached, he sensed they were supernatural beasts. He slew them with arrows, sword, and bare hands. But then the pyramid shuddered beneath his feet, and a stone column fell across his legs, pinning him down as his sword fell just out of reach. Toward him stalked the winged ape, "a thing neither man, beast, nor devil."

"A TENSE WHITE SHAPE"

And then, "in one mad instant, she was there"—Bêlit, a ghostly pale shape thrusting a gleaming sword toward the monster's breast. It recoiled, and as she turned her gaze toward Conan, he saw "her love flaming, a naked elemental thing of raw fire and molten lava." Then she was gone. Breaking free, Conan scooped up his sword and cut the creature in two. And he saw that the dead hyenas that ringed them had become the carcasses of dead men, probably the Stygians whom the *Tigress* had chased up the Zarkheba, several years earlier.



A Return from the Beyond

"The dazed Cimmerian saw, between him and the onrushing wraith, her lithe figure, shimmering like ivory beneath the moon..." from the Nemedian Chronicles

Death of a Queen

The Chronicles conclude "So passed the Queen of the Black Coast, and leaning on his red stained sword, Conan stood silently until the red glow had faded..."

The Vale of Lost Women

After plunging into the interior of Kush after the death of Bêlit, Conan had soon become the war chief of the Bamula tribe. He and his warriors were holding palaver when he learned that two Ophirean siblings had been captured by the Bakalah and that the girl was to be wed to Bajujh, chief of the Bakalah. He decided, almost on a whim, to save the bride-to-be, so the Bamulas attacked the Bakalah at the height of a nighttime feast. But, amid the battle, the girl Livia panicked and fled into the jungle on a stolen steed.

Thrown from her horse, she found herself in a beautiful glade, lush with great white blossoms that seemed to whisper to her, as if in a dream. At last she felt as though she was safe from the brutal lust of men, but this was no ordinary glen. She'd heard the Bakalah speak with fear of a valley to which the young women of a strange and ancient race had fled long ago. There, the old gods had transformed them into white flowers, in order to help them elude their male pursuers.

As Livia wandered among the blossoms, she came upon a great stone, hewn seemingly by human hands, and was suddenly aware of the slender, naked, brown skinned women surrounding her. They laid Livia out upon the altar-stone and began to dance and utter strange chants.

A Devil from the Outer Dark

As the chanting rose, a batlike shape began to descend toward her from the night sky. The women believed this to be the god that had transformed them years ago, come to claim its latest sacrifice.

Then Conan struck. After a fearsome struggle, the thing broke free and soared skyward on crippled wings. Conan explained to Livia that what he had fought was no god, but only "a devil from the Outer Dark." Its ilk were "thick as fleas in the belt of light which surrounds this world." When they came down to Earth, they had to assume material form—flesh of some sort. And flesh could always be sliced by a good, strong sword.

Conan promised to see that Livia made it back to Ophir. The grateful Livia was willing to stay in the jungle with her rescuer, but Conan merely grunted "Haven't I explained that you're not the proper woman for the war chief of the Bamulas?"

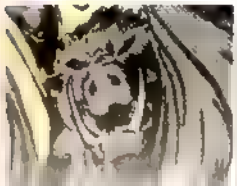
Livia

Let this young gold-haired Ophirean stand as a representative of the legion of females whose sole claim to fame, in the Nemedian Chronicles or elsewhere, is to have been rescued, in her hour of deepest peril, by the sword of Conan the barbarian. She and her brother Theteles were of a family in Ophir that bred scientists and noblemen. She was accompanying her brother to Kheshatta, Stygia's mysterious City of Magicians, when Kushite raiders assaulted their caravan. They were to be held for ransom by the Kushites, but they wound up falling into the hands of [illegible] dwelling Bakalah. Theteles was butchered before his sister's eyes. His body was fed to jackals, while Livia was to be reserved for the pleasure of the tribe's chief.

A Dangerous Haven

Livia soon learned that she was far from safe in this valley among these brown skinned women with flowers in their night black hair and glowing, human eyes.

THE HUNDRED-HEADED MONSTER



THE SNOUT IN THE DARK

Meroë, capital of semicivilized Kush, they cared n[o]t. The invisible [th]ing materialized out of shapeless gray fog—a phantom that congealed into grim solidity just as its victims beheld a piglike snout covered with coarse bristles. Next, it emerged from the swirling mass—huge, misshapen, and bestial, yet standing upright. Beneath its hoglike head sprouted a pair of hairy arms with baboonlike hands. And it moved with paralyzing speed to tear and slash at its victim with jagged tusks.

Conan's war chieftainship of the Bamulas lasted more than a year, according to certain of the tales. But at last the tribe's crafty priests poisoned the minds of the Bamulas against this "pale-skinned outlander." Conan gutted the high priest before he could be flayed alive, but felt it expedient to flee north across the savannah, where he was stalked by hungry lions. But the beasts would not cross a certain invisible barrier, within which loomed the ruins of an ancient castle. Taking refuge in it for the night, Conan dreamed of whispering shadows. He sensed that they were the ghosts of thousands of men who had died within the ancient structure—and that they hungered for the blood of the living.

THE CASTLE OF TERROR

To the castle that night came a party of Stygian slavers, 40 men strong. As they slept—and as Conan watched from hiding—a huge amorphous creature took form. Made of the vital force of thousands of dead beings, it launched itself against the terrified Stygians, and their swords were useless against it. As Conan galloped off on one of their horses, silence fell upon the accursed ruins behind.

MAYHEM IN MEROË

After arriving in Meroë, Conan soon found himself at odds with a demon that Muru the Kordafan often summoned at the behest of Tuthmes, a local nobleman who in turn used it for political assassinations. After Conan nearly managed to behead the beast, it lurched away, its deformed head wobbling on its half-severed neck, eventually falling dead at the feet of Muru and Tuthmes. Incensed at this treachery thus revealed, the Meroan populace tore the plotters apart—launching a rebellion that brought down even the Queen. As for Conan, he'd had enough of such intrigues. He rode out of town with a blonde wench he'd met the day before.

NINETY NINE HEADS TOO MANY
The living sprouted countless tentacled heads, appendages, and hungry mouths.

HOLY FATHER SET!

CONAN

THE WARRIOR

The word "warrior" can have many meanings, and Conan was a warrior in many ways—and in many places—as he neared the age of 30. Penniless after his long trek north through the black kingdoms, where his reputation as Amra had stood him in good stead, he found himself again in need of gainful employment in the Hyborian lands. Thanks to the constant feuding between the greedy monarchs of Shem, Koth, and Ophir, there was always a market for a good sword arm.

FABLES AND FOLLIES

Legends and fables of his exploits during this period are abundant, although some ring truer than others. He is said to have saved the throne for King Phthemenes, a Zingaran sovereign, and to have narrowly avoided becoming a casualty of the Zingaran Inquisition. It is even rumored that the barbarian briefly became a pirate along the coast of Vanaheim, although piracy so far north is not even hinted at in the Nemedian chronicles. Still, who can say that a few of the most outrageous of these stories may not actually have happened?

KOTH AND KHORAJA

One frequent setting for many of these apocryphal stories is Koth, perhaps because it was one of the older Hyborian kingdoms and was large enough to touch both sea-girding Argos in the west and the outer steppes of Turan in the east. In these tales, Koth seems to be the crossroads of the world, and the place where Conan is said to have encountered a number of incredible beings, including Imhotep, the Devourer of Souls. Two different legends from this time tell of Conan allying with a young prince from Khitai and briefly assuming the role of warlord for the Kothian city-state of El Shah Maddoc.

Conan's verifiable exploits during this time are exciting enough. It is known that he re-entered mercenary service in the western nations, rising to the position of captain under Amalric the Nemedian. In Khoraja, Conan was destined to become, for the first time, a true leader of men—an experience that perhaps set him on the road to becoming king of opulent Aquilonia.

SURVIVOR

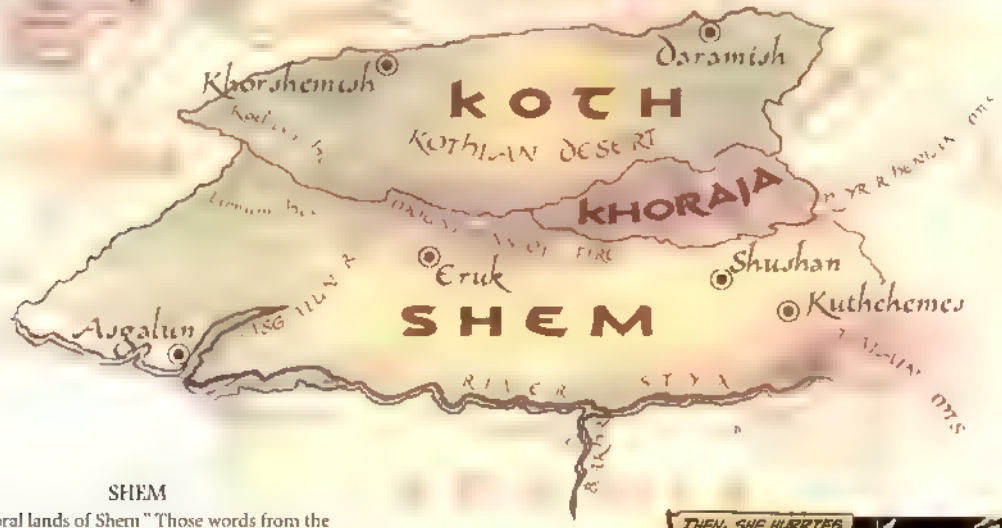
In a prominent story cycle, Conan joined the army of King Samirabi of Akkharia, a city-state in the south of Shem. Through treachery, Akkharia's forces were wiped out almost to a man, and Conan was that man. Many scholars have questioned the Cimmerian's knack for being the sole survivor of so many conflicts. Explain it away as you will—as the vagaries of fate, or even as the Cimmerian god Crom looking after him, unlikely as that may seem—the most logical explanation is perhaps that Conan the barbarian was the greatest swordsman and fighter of his age.

That alone may suffice to explain why, at battle's end, when the smoke and dust cleared, he was often left standing alone in a bloody blood-hued, ankle-deep landscape bathed in carnage and destruction.

Trade & War

One Brief Shining Moment

Khoraja is seldom mentioned in the Nemedian Chronicles, but when Koth was getting its armies, deeds done there were widely celebrated.



Shem

"The pastoral lands of Shem." Those words from the Nemedian Chronicles reveal what the rest of the known world thought of Shem during the Hyborian Age. Founded in ancient days by the nomads known as the Sons of Shem, its western regions were composed of fertile meadowlands, with cities lying at slightly higher elevations. Although the land became more arid as one traveled eastward, caravans never ceased crisscrossing the kingdom, and many cities fed off the traffic of trade going from west to east and from north to south. Asgalun and Anakia... Akkharia and Nippr Shumir and Ghaza... all Shemite cities were crossroads at heart.

There were numerous wars between the cities of the meadows and the cities of the desert, between armies made up on both sides of grim horsemen with blue-black beards. The land gave birth to the Asshuria, a celebrated warrior clan that is often mentioned in accounts of mercenary armies of that era.

Paradoxically, although trade flowed like a river through their country, the Shemites profited far more from the movement of goods than from trade of their own. Nor did they send ships to sea to transport goods either to or from their shores. As the Chronicles point out: "There was scant profit in trade with the fierce and wary sons of Shem." They were, for the most part, middlemen.

Khoraja

Khoraja was the name of both the small kingdom nestled between Koth and the Eastern Desert and its principal city. In fact, that settlement was its *only* true city, for a map of the day reveals that no other towns within its mountainous borders were considered substantial enough to rate even a dot or a scribbled name.

As to its geography, Khoraja was separated from Shem by the formidable Kothian Escarpment, and its Shamla Pass was essential to caravans en route from the Hyborian lands to Turan or kingdoms to the south.

Once a part of Shem, Khoraja had been carved out of Shemite lands by the swords of Kothic adventurers many years before. And the people of Khoraja never lost their fervent desire for independence.

THEN, SHE HURRIES FORTH, BEFORE HER RESOLUTION MAY FALTER
NEVER BEFORE HAS THIS DAUGHTER OF ARISTOCRATS VENTURED UNATTENDED OUTSIDE HER ANCESTRAL PALACE.

Khorajan Nights

While Khoraja's young king, was [illegible] by the usurper Ogbur that spoke [illegible] have fallen [illegible] had the king's sister not paid heed to a prophesy that sent her out into the streets of the capital

KING AKHÎROM

The first thing the legends reveal about Akhîrom, king of the Shemitish city-state of Asgalun, is that he was at least half-mad—a monarch who ruled by whims. Once, he decreed that for an entire week the streets and buildings of Asgalun would be lit like day, from dusk to sunrise. The following week, he commanded his people to burn no lights whatsoever, day or night, and they stumbled about in darkness. When he banned grapes, wine merchants cried "Ruin!" On separate occasions he decreed that cobblers could only make street shoes for women and that the females from the province of Pelishtia should be "shut up like eagles in cages."

THE KING AND THE SLAVE GIRL

When he ordered Rufia brought to him, it was only because he wanted information about Othbaal. She catered to Akhîrom's ego by convincing him that he did not need to swear by gods like Pteor, because *he* was a god, whose his face shone on her like the sun. A renowned narcissist, he needed little convincing... and Rufia had a new and powerful protector.

OF WINGS AND KINGS

But one can be too convincing! When Akhîrom decided love was a human weakness and thus beneath him, Rufia was passed from one master to another. Yet she would have her revenge. When a mob of citizens howled for his blood, the king sought to prove himself worthy of their worship by spreading his arms like wings and stepping off the palace roof. He was probably halfway down before he realized that perhaps he was not a god after all. "He struck the stones of the courtyard," the legend says, "with the sound of a melon hit by a sledgehammer."

RUFIA

This Ophirean slave was one of the most colorful female rogues of the Conan legend cycles. Through strategic witchcraft and inventive lovemaking, she became a favorite of the Shemite general Othbaal of Akkharia, and later of King Akhîrom himself. As such, she wielded great power. When civil war erupted and the king died, she rode north with Conan, laughing lustily. She probably sensed the Cimmerian was not a man who could be "managed"—but by Ishtar, it would be fun trying!

THE SUN KING?

In order to evade the mad king's inquisition, Rufia convinced them that he radiated power, crying, "I burn! I die in the blaze of thy glory!"

OHHHHH! WHERE--?
FOR A MOMENT, THE TERROR OF THAT EARLIER TIME SEEMS AN UNTOLD ETERNITY DISTANT-- A FLEETING PHANTASM OF UNREAL IMAGES.
THEN, SHE STARES WILDLY ABOUT THE ROOM FOR HER CAPTOR--

PRINCESS YASMELA

Yasmela never wanted to rule Khoraja. But when her brother, King Khossus, was held hostage by Ophir's sovereign, she had no choice. As fate would have it, the enigmatic leader known as "Natohk, the Veiled One" appeared during this time and united the desert nomads into a fanatical army bent on overrunning first Khoraja, then all the Hyborian lands.

A GOD MOVES IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS

After Natohk came to her in a nightmare vision, threatening both to conquer her kingdom and ravish her person, Yasmela prayed at the temple of Mitra for advice. Whether it was a god who spoke to her, or priests whispering from behind the altar, she heeded the advice: "Go forth upon the streets alone, and place your kingdom in the hands of the first man you meet there." That man turned out to be Conan, a soldier in Amalric's mercenary force.

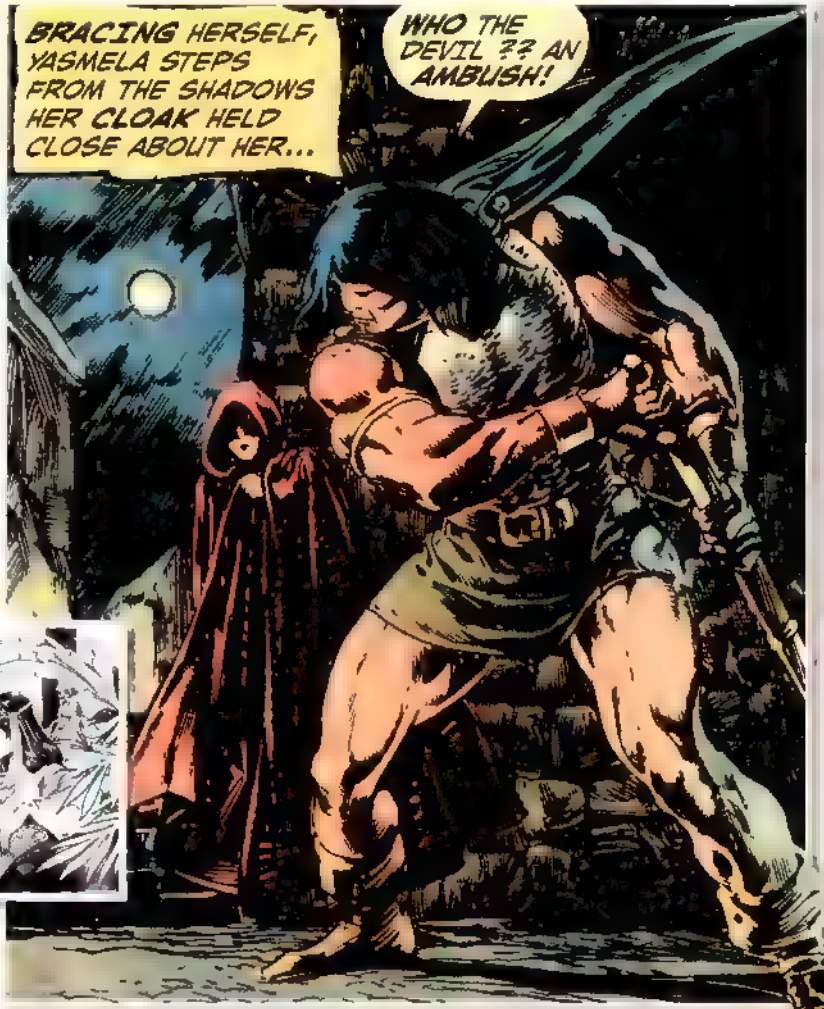
TRIUMPH AND A CELEBRATION

Yasmela rode with Conan as he led Khoraja's forces against the nomad horde—and scattered them. And when Natohk carried her off, Conan pursued them into ancient ruins. Before the Veiled One could sacrifice Yasmela to long-forgotten dark deities, the Cimmerian slew him. Then, the Nemedian Chronicles relate, "out on the desert, in the hills among the oceans of dead, men were dying, were howling with wounds and thirst and madness, and kingdoms were staggering," but this couldn't prevent Conan and Yasmela from making love on the very altar upon which Thugra Khotan had meant to sacrifice her.

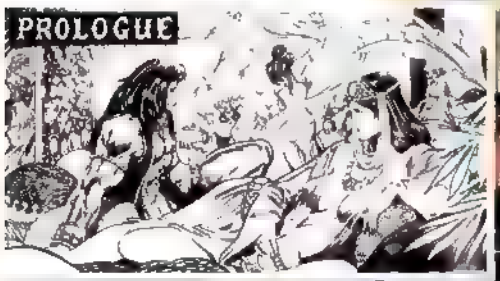
"MISTER QUEEN"

Conan's pride, however, refused to let him play "Mister Queen" to any woman, and soon he left Khoraja. By some accounts, not verified by the Chronicles, he rescued Yasmela's brother Khossus from a stronghold where he was held by men loyal to the King of Ophir. If true, Yasmela was probably only too happy to relinquish the throne upon his return.

A Prayer for the Answering
Like all in Khoraja, Yasmela and her maidservant Vateesa had long since forsaken the worship of holy Mitra for that of the goddess Ishtar. But on this night, only the Lord of Light could save them.



A Moonlit Offer
When Conan rescued the Yasmela was and the only was as real as he became commander of Khora s armies.

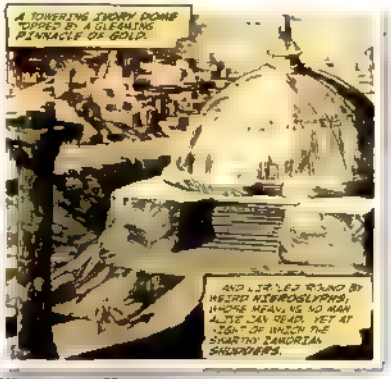


A Courting We Will Go
It s the court s to doubt even the he moved on to other

NATOHK, A.K.A. THUGRA KHOTAN

While scrambling amid the forbidding ruins of the once-mighty desert city of Kuthchemes, the thief Shevatas could never have known that he was about to unleash an unholy terror upon the world. He merely wanted the gems and gold that adorned its ivory dome. Of no interest to him were the bones of Thugra Khotan, the dark sorcerer who had reigned three millennia before.

But Shevatas' act of trespass restored the wizard to life—and he had time for only one hideous scream before he perished.


A TOWERING IVORY DOME TOPPED BY A GLEAMING PINNACLE OF GOLD.
AND LITTERED ROUND BY WEIRD HIEROGLYPHS, INSCRIBED HEAVY AS TO AGE ALIKE CAN READ, YET AT SIGHT OF WHICH THE SWARTHY ZAMORIAN SHUDDERS.

WELCOME TO KUTHCHEMES
"In the midst of that vastness the giant nerving fangs of the ruins . . . stood dominated by the towering ivory dome before which Shevatas stood trembling." —from the Nemedian Chronicles

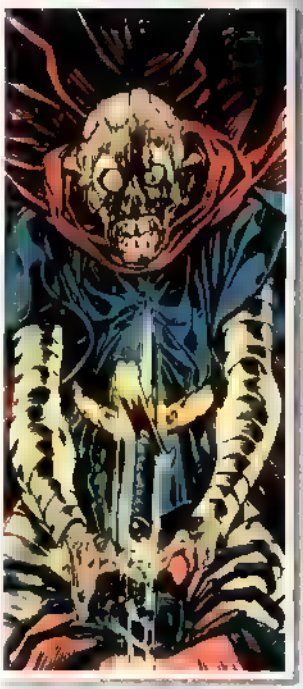
SPELL IT BACKWARDS

When he appeared to the nomads, Thugra Khotan took the name of "Natohk, the Veiled One," sweeping out of the desert on a great black camel with glowing, cloven hooves. Awed, the nomads vowed to follow him wherever he led. And he meant to lead them to the Hyborean uplands, to a world of wealth and plunder. Soon a crimson tide swept northwest, carrying all before it with fire and sword until it reached Khoraja.

THE VEIL FALLS AWAY

When she saw the coin that was brought into the war camp, Yasmela knew the truth behind Natohk's mysterious identity. On the coin was Thugra Khotan, a man who died three millennia ago—and it was the same face that Natohk had shown her in her night mares. Being a delicate, sheltered princess, she promptly passed out.

Conan, despite his fear of sorcery, triumphed over the Veiled One's nomads and in the ivory dome in ruined Kuthchemes, the barbarian confronted Thugra Khotan. The Chronicles say that he bore the features shown on the ancient coin, although later artists have sometimes rendered him as a half rotted, 3000-year-old mummy! When the Cimmerian hurled his sword, Thugra Khotan proved mortal even this second time around. He who had been born again, could die again.



FACING DEATH—AGAIN
When Conan [illegible] when [illegible] Natohk was the handsome [illegible] ravaged corpse [illegible] possible [illegible] naked [illegible]

SHROUDED IN MYSTERY
[illegible] Natohk's camel could [illegible] spread huge wings and fly, and [illegible] wizard took [illegible] black, brutish, manlike shape at night.

The Free Companions

Conan's life as a corsair along the Black Coast, then as a mercenary soldier who briefly commanded an army, had stirred his spirit. If, as some records say, he returned to Cimmeria for a short time after the episode in Khoraja, he quickly returned south when he heard of new wars brewing there.

A rebel prince of Koth was fighting to overthrow King Strabonus—and, like many other adventurous souls, Conan enlisted in the rebel army. Alas, the treacherous prince made peace with Strabonus—and Conan and his fellow mercenaries were soon out of work and reduced more or less to the level of outlaws.

With Conan as one of their leaders, this ragtag force banded together under the name "the Free Companions" and set about harrying the borders of Koth, Zamora, and Turan impartially.

Lethal Lore

Other accounts record lustrous legends of the Free Companions. It is said that Conan reunited with the lusty Zamboulan she-thief Isparana, and that they both joined the mercenary army of Amalric, whom Conan knew from Khoraja. This cycle of tales adds details—which may or may not be gospel-true—of the rebellion against King Strabonus of Koth. One of them involves the Sword-Vixens, a force of blade-bearing women that joined the rebellion.

An All-Star Cast

If later tales can be trusted, many of Conan's former comrades soon showed up at the Free Companions' camp in the wild borderlands, including Zula, last of the Zamballahs, who had parted from Conan and Bêlit on the shores of the Black Coast many months before; the hulking Vanir Fafnir, now known as Fafnir Hellhand, for his new arm had once belonged to a demon—and perhaps still did; Turgohl, a powerful and loyal mute warrior from Khitai; Iuma, the Kushite; and more... If such a gathering of greats never truly happened, there are those who'll swear it should have. By Crom, what they might have accomplished!

Motley Crew
Legend has it that Conan's Free Companions were composed of a wide variety of warriors, including deadly Kushite spearmen.

An Army without a Country
According to one legend, after Amalric was killed, Conan took over the mercenaries, who, henceforth, as Free Companions, [illegible] owed no allegiance to country or king.

IMHOTEP, RAVAGER OF WORLDS

In legends in which Conan figures prominently, the demon Imhotep was exiled to the world of men 000 years before Conan's time by the she-demon (or goddess) Pathir. His one hope of victory over her was an amulet of power she once held—so he would stop at nothing to acquire it, destroying any and all who stood in his way.

As Conan was passing through Shem, he crossed paths with Imhotep and was sorely tested—for the scythe-wielding, red-garbed demon arrived with his equally fiendish army mounted on crimson, bat-winged stallions. In the aftermath of destruction, Conan found taken amulet that helped him both defeat and enslave the Ravager.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE

[illegible] Conan was taken to [illegible] the time stream by Pathir, who wore the guise of a human female. He learned that ten millennia before, she had given to a Turanian nomad the very amulet that now forced Imhotep to obey the barbarian. When she couldn't gain the amulet by seduction, she attacked the Cimmerian. He managed to kill her—barely—but had to be saved from a collapsing tower by Imhotep. The demon traded Conan his life for the amulet and flew away. But they would meet again—in other tales, perhaps scribed by other hands.

IMHOTEP AND WRARRL

Beyond doubt, Imhotep, Ravager of Worlds, and Wrarrl, the Devourer of Souls, were two of the most "cosmic" entities Conan ever fought in the legend cycles. Thus it was perhaps inevitable that the two demons themselves would clash—and once again Conan held the balance of power in his bronze hands as the universe trembled.

ENSLAVED AGAIN

No human but the Cimmerian could see Imhotep—and thanks to the power of Pathir's amulet, Conan was able to make the rampaging demon his reluctant and vanquished slave [illegible] while.

A PROPHESY FULFILLED?

[illegible] people of [illegible] revered [illegible] [illegible] the Ravager [illegible] called Conan [illegible] Redeemer [illegible] who was [illegible] [illegible] the world.

CONAN

THE CHIEFTAN

Perhaps it all started the night that the sister to the captive king went out into the streets and put her kingdom's army into the hands of a stranger. When all was said and done, Conan had had his first taste of leadership. But power is a cup from which a man, having lifted it once, will soon desire to drink again.

After the interlude in Khoraja, the Cimmerian, who had always been restless under the authority of other men, now sought the chance to lead whenever he encountered a new group. In the years that followed, more than one group of ruffians, brigands, and pirates approached Conan as if he were a victim, or at most a fellow cutthroat, only to find themselves happily following him into battle soon thereafter. On the steppes of Turan, it was the kozaki who paid homage to the barbarian shortly after crossing paths with him. And in the hills of Vendhya, the Afghuli hillmen followed suit.

In the case of the kozaks, he arrived in their midst all but empty-handed, but soon found that he had old friends among those fierce horsemen and the Red Brotherhood of the Vilayet Sea. When he united the groups under his command, the pickings were better than ever ... for a time.

When his ultimate plan to weld the hill tribes into a single army failed, he simply shrugged and headed back whence he'd come but, for better or worse, the tribes he'd led were changed forever.

Return to the East

TURAN

According to some tales, when Conan had first fought for Turan, it had been a kingdom. Now it had placed its booted foot on the path to empire, and it would no longer look the other way as kozaks and pirates nibbled away at its fringes.

VILAYET SEA

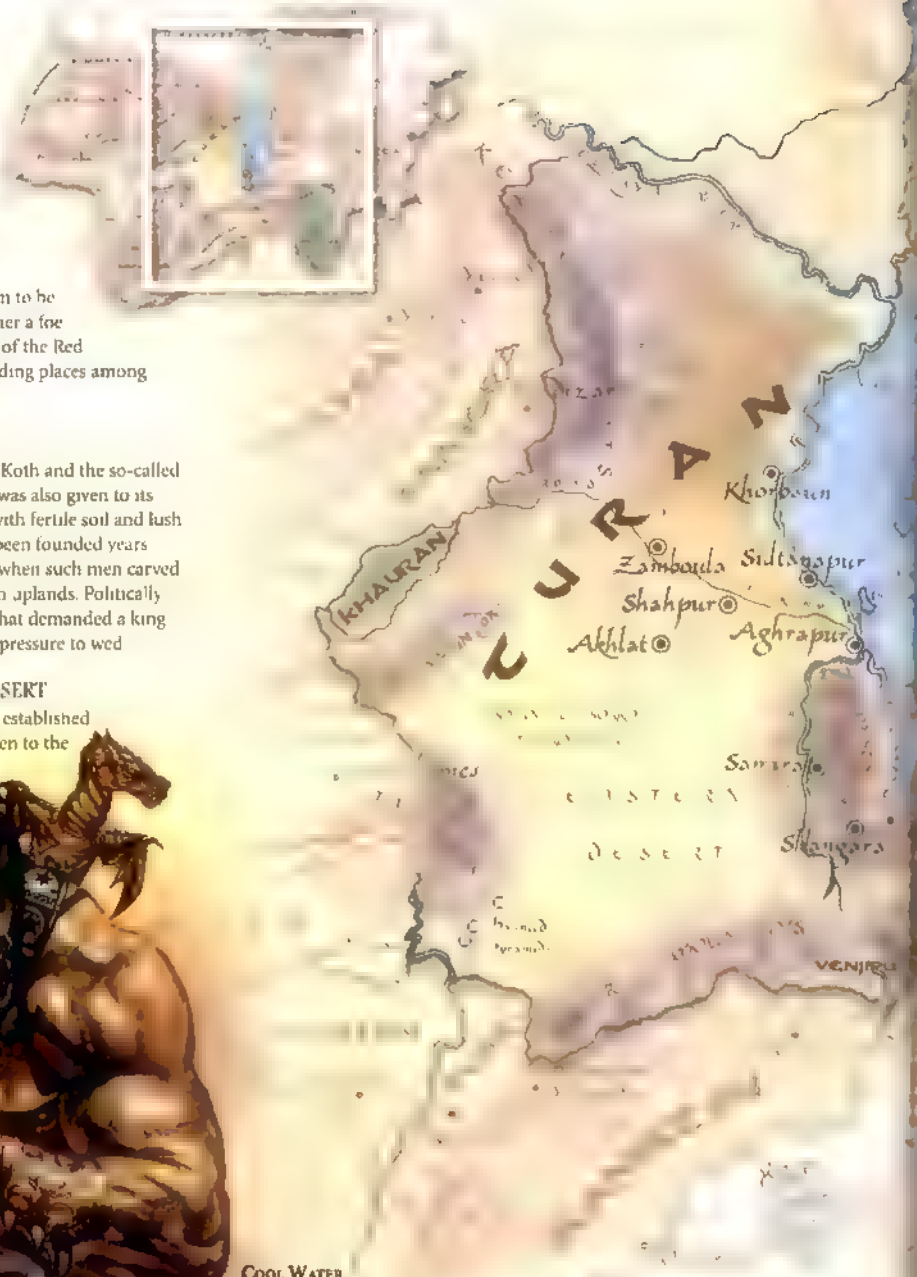
The Inland Sea, being finite, would seem to be an easy place for imperial forces to corner a foe. But the Vilayet was huge, and the ships of the Red Brotherhood had no trouble finding hiding places among its myriad isles and river inlets.

KHAURAN

Khauran lay between the eastern tip of Koth and the so-called Eastern Desert. Khauran, whose name was also given to its capital and principal city, was blessed with fertile soil and lush meadows. Like Khoraja, Khauran had been founded years before by Kothic adventurers in an era when such men carved several tiny kingdoms out of the eastern uplands. Politically there seems to have been no tradition that demanded a king be the ruler, for Queen Taramis felt no pressure to wed.

THE EASTERN DESERT

The Eastern Desert itself had no firmly established boundaries. It was simply the name given to the whole great sandy



Cool Water

More than once in his colorful life, Conan found himself wandering [illegible] and wasteland or another. [illegible] more formidable than the Eastern Desert, where not even [illegible] were safe from ravens.

Swords and Sand
The Eastern Desert was alive in more ways than one. There very wind was known to take the form of a swirling simoom, and not even the sweat-and-swordsman of the age could save a traveling, swirling sands with a blade.

Road of Sand
The Book of Kings tracked four strands of spice-scented wheat to Peshkhauri, the Eastern Desert's [illegible] were always beyond price, the purest wastes

expanse that lay to the east of Stygia, and Shem, and the Hyborian lands. Beyond it to the east was Turan, whose borders were forever expanding westward

VENDHYA

This ancient kingdom of the East was ruled by a royal family who were the scions of a warrior caste known as the Kshatriya. Its southwestern region was called Afghulistan, and to the north of Vendhya were the towering Himelian Mountains, whose more habitable areas were known as Gholistan. The Nemedian Chronicles indicate that tropical Vendhya possessed rich agricultural lands, as well as many precious minerals, which made this sub-continent desirable to imperial Turan

Of Vanished Isles
Years before [illegible] a [illegible] [illegible] Vanir [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] Vilayet Sea. But it had sunk beneath their very feet. When he returned [illegible] decade later he stared over the exact spot

Olivia

She was a daughter of the king of Ophir, but when she refused to marry a prince of Koth, she was sold as a slave to a Shemite chief, who then gave her to Shah Amu-Sath, lord of purple-gardened Akif. There, she endured his insatiable lust for some time, the memory of which stung her "like a slaver's whip." During a citywide celebration, she escaped from the him, but the brash warrior-lord overtook her. Only Conan's timely arrival saved her, after which Olivia had little choice but to accompany him to an uninhabited isle in the middle of the Vilayet Sea. When Conan emerged victorious over the horrors of that place, she was proud to share his life. And when their dalliance was over. Why, she was a survivor and the daughter of a king. Whatever the world threw at her next, she would be ready

AS HANUMAN HAS DECREED, THEN!
AYE! WE SHALL SLAY MANY OF THEM ERE WE DIE!
THEY GRIN LIKE HUNGRY WOLVES IN THE DAWN, THUMBING THEIR WEAPONS.

CHIEF OF THE KOZAKS

It was said that the kozaks—or kozaki—were born on horseback. And those who felt their wrath could well believe such tales, for when they bore down upon hapless villages or careless troops, they and their stallions seemed like a horde of howling centaurs armed with bows and swords and spears. Yet when pursued by a larger force, they could fade away to regroup and attack another day.

CONAN MEETS THE KOZAKS

Having made Koth and environs a bit too hot to hold them, Conan led the Free Companions eastward to the Turanian steppes—and there encountered the fierce kozaks. At an earlier stage in his life, the Cimmerian would probably have ordered his mostly-Hyborian followers to do battle with the easterners. But, having gotten a limited taste for leadership in Khoraja, he seems to have found a way to merge the two forces, for when next he is written of in the Chronicles, he is chief of the kozaki. Under him, they ravaged the outposts of the Turanian empire for many months. And, while cold hard facts are hard to come by, the deeds of the kozaks under Conan have become the stuff of legend....

THE POINT OF THE SPEAR

Over the years, the kozaki had grown in numbers. If they were to find an ambitious leader, what would Turan do then...?

LEGENDS A-BORNING

In one tale, a daring raid upon Turanian troops transporting gold to Aghrapur led to a second encounter with the pre-Cataclysmic wizard Rotath of Lemuria, now merged with that gigantic gold-eating worm, and a clash across time with Conan's tribal antecedent (and perhaps ancestor) King Kull of Atlantis and Valusia. Another account has the kozaks raiding a caravan and capturing the half-sister of Iranistan's king, who was being sent to the harem of Prince Yezdigerd. After sending a ransom note to Jehungir Agha and Lord Khovan, masters of the Turanian outpost at Fort Ghori, Conan was eventually forced to rescue the princess from a falcon that transformed itself into a flying demon.

THE FALL OF THE KOZAKI

In time, it fell to Shah Amurath, master of the Turanian city of Akif, to deal with Conan—or feel the wrath of King Yildiz. The warrior-lord set up an ambush that wiped out most of the kozaks. Some say that even in defeat, the Cimmerian had to fight several of his former comrades, who were convinced that he had betrayed them. Whether true or false, we cannot know. But the Chronicles affirm that it was Shah Amurath who finally broke the back of the kozaks, once and for all.

ALPHA MALE

[illegible] several stories in the legends [illegible] Conan's leadership [illegible] kozaki [illegible] what is [illegible] worth his [illegible] who didn't inspire a bit of envy, even hatred?

SHAH AMURATH

Shah Amurath was a clever man and the lord of Akif, a city that sat astride the road twixt the Hyborian kingdoms and Aghrapur— and at a strategic bend of the River Ibars. As guardian of the approaches to the Turanian capital, it was his duty to defeat the hellish horsemen who were forever nibbling at the edges of the empire, so he lured the kozaki deep into Turanian territory, where his force of 15,000 men cut them down in great scarlet swaths in a bloody battle by the Ibars. But Shah Amurath's weakness for a slave girl caused him to gallop into a reedy swamp alone in pursuit of her. He caught up with her... but Conan caught up with him. The Cimmerian could scarcely believe his good fortune, and when his sword ended its rising and falling, he turned away from what the Chronicles call "a gory travesty that only vaguely resembled a human being."

Iron Shadows in the Moon

Fleeing to an isle in the Vilayet Sea, Conan and the Ophirian princess Olivia found themselves upon a mysterious plateau strewn with shards of ancient masonry, where stood life-sized statues, apparently made of black iron and shaped like tall, lithely powerful men with cruel faces. To Conan they were merely statues. But not to Olivia ..

THE WRATH OF A GOD

That night, while sleeping amid the ruins, she had a dream—or was it merely a vision of another time, in that same place?—in which she saw men identical to the statuary, dark, and hawk-faced warriors, performing a strange and awful rite. They surrounded and tortured a godlike, golden-haired youth who was bound to a pillar. Then a dagger in an ebon hand struck—and his cries were stilled.

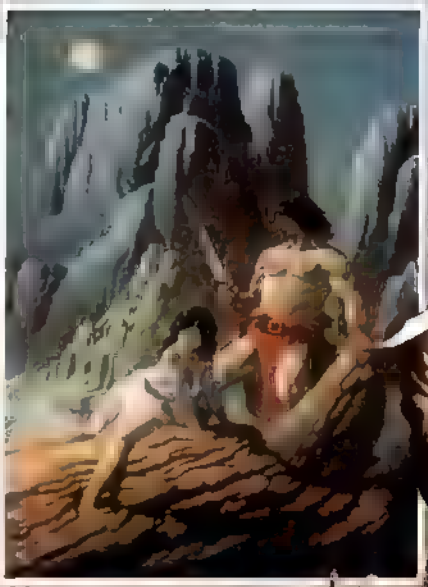
But a moment later, and another figure was there—as godlike as the dead youth he resembled, and poised for vengeance. Lifting a hand, he spoke a terrible invocation: "Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!" And at that intoning, the dark figures ceased to move, as if frozen by icy blasts from the north. The figure pointed at the moon, and the warriors knew that only when it shone would they ever again be able to move.

PIRATES!

At dawn, Conan was glad to see the pirates of the so-called Red Brotherhood come ashore. He quickly slew their vile chief, and most of the men were more than willing to accept him as their new captain, until a stone slung by cowardly Aratus laid him low from behind. They bound the Cimmerian and carried him into the shelter of the great greenish ruins, where they discussed his fate—while Olivia could only watch from hiding.

SHADOWS IN THE MOONLIGHT

But the pirates got down to ale-guzzling and soon were passed out, drunk and snoring. The moon rose in the sky, as the flame-eyed shadows of the statues loomed above the seamen. And when the moonlight struck the dark iron, they lived—and they slew! It was a massacre, not a battle. Although most of the pirates were able to flee to their ship, others would never depart the ruins of greenish stone. They were victims of the Iron Shadows in the Moon.



Death in Threes

The greatest terror of the Vilayet Sea to which Conan and Olivia were not the only victims was the bloodthirsty pirates of the Red Brotherhood—but that which awaited them on a grassy plateau, with its long, broad stone ramp made of crumbling greenish stone.

Prey or Hunter?

Conan and Olivia sensed danger on the isle, but they couldn't know the forms it would take—such as the great furred, carnivorous man-ape, whose attack Conan barely survived.

Chief of the Zuagirs

The Zuagirs were an aggressive tribe of nomadic Shemites dwelling in the Eastern Desert 'twixt Koth and Khauran in the west, and Turan toward the sunrise. They preyed on the endless parade of caravans that plied the arid regions south of the Road of Kings. Little is known for certain of the deeds of the Cimmerian at this time, but, as always, there survive numerous tales that were told around desert campfires for many a year afterward.

Hawks of the Desert
Under the leadership first of Nigerd Vladislav and even more so under Conan the Cimmerian, the Zuagirs became the most feared raiders between Turan and the Hyborian lands.

The Decapitating God

In one such tale, Kah-Tah-Dhen, which means "the Decapitating God," was freed by an earthquake after being imprisoned for millennia beneath a mountain east of the Shemite city of Shusan. Its ruler sent out a force that included both his greatest warrior to fight the "god," and his favorite concubine to be sacrificed to it—whichever seemed more expedient. Conan and some of his Zuagirs followed the Shemites into caverns where dwelt the monstrous, spiderlike Kah-Tah-Dhen, whom Conan destroyed by caving in a portion of the tunnel upon it. Perhaps it was not really a god, after all!

Curse of the Cat-Goddess

Ere long, the Cimmerian found himself deposed by an envious sub-chieftain who had fallen under the spell of a small cat-shaped idol he had found in the desert. But he led the Zuagirs only to death outside the walls of an impregnable city. After Conan dispatched the traitor, he felt the idol calling him to attack the city anew and realized that the idol fed on death and sacrificed men to feed that hunger. He hurled it into the desert, where the winds covered it with sand and no one would hear or heed its seductive feline whisper.

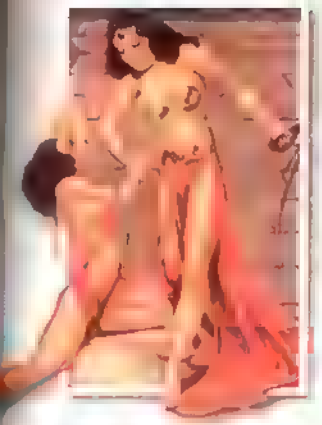
The Trouble with Friends Is . . . They Can Become Very Dangerous Enemies

With a few trusted Zuagir companions, Conan undertook a hunt for treasure in the Kezankian Mountains, across Zamora, and back to the Vilayet Sea—in each location, fighting a monster and gaining a piece of mystic armor. One of his "comrades" donned the armor and used it to defeat Conan, then rode off to make himself ruler of the world.

Conan, however, tracked the man down and destroyed all three pieces of armor—as well as their usurper.

Vengeance Is Mine!

Conan's leadership of the Zuagirs was not destined to last. Using information provided by a Zamorian turncoat, King Yezdigerd sent troops to ambush them. Surviving the attack, Conan led the pitiful remnant of his Zuagirs across the sands in pursuit of the Zamorian, until one night they deserted him while he slept. Conan learned that, while his own code might demand vengeance in payment for betrayal, others might decide in the end to be more practical, and to forego revenge in favor of mere life. That was not the way of a Cimmerian, however, and ere long, he had his revenge.



SISTERS UNDONE

TARAMIS & SALOME

They were sisters—as alike in physical aspect as any image seen in a mirror, yet as different as night from day—or good from evil.

SALOME AND THE MARK OF THE WITCH

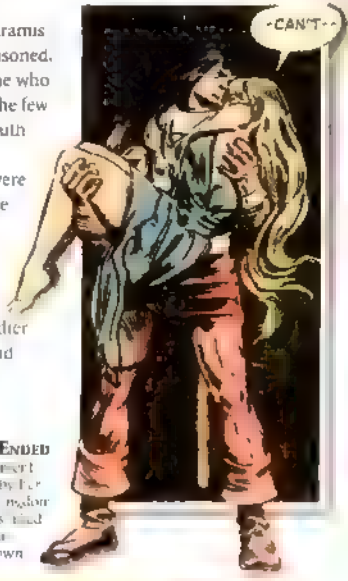
Within an hour of her birth, Salome was carried into the desert and left for dead, because she bore the mark of the witch. This mark was the curse of the kings of Khauran, passed down from the first queen of the Askhaurian dynasty, who had trafficked with a "fiend of darkness" and borne him a daughter. Thereafter, once in each century, a female infant of that line was born with a scarlet half-moon between her breasts—a birthmark that signaled a dark destiny.

Each such witch was named Salome, and so it would be into an unglimpsed future. According to the prophesy, there would always "be Salomes to walk the earth, to trap men's hearts by their sorcery, to dance before the kings of the world, and see the heads of the wise men fall at their pleasure."

REVENGE OF THE DAMNED

Khauran's rightful queen had never seen her sister... until the night she awoke from a dream-haunted slumber to see a face that looked like her own reflection in a mirror, yet displaying the opposite of every one of her own traits. There was lust instead of serenity, cruelty instead of kindness. And this was no mirror, but a living woman—Salome. Taramis was cast down, imprisoned, her place taken by one who ruled in her name. The few who suspected the truth were put to death.

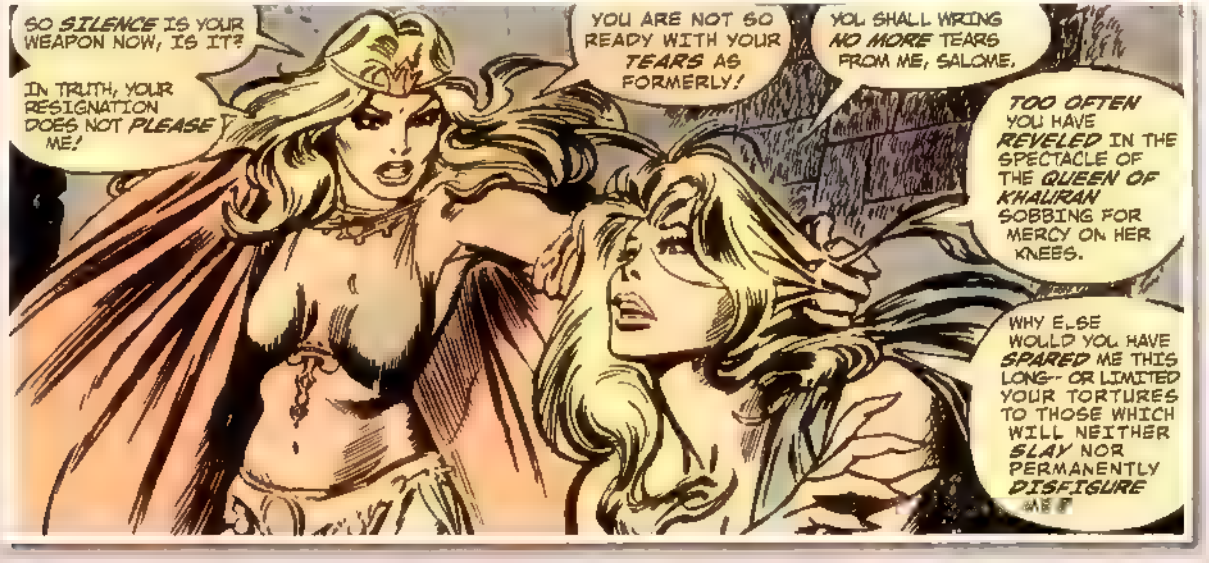
Misery and pain were Taramis' lot, until the day Conan led his comrades into the heart of the city. In that hour, Salome was stabbed by a soldier loyal to Taramis—and Taramis was freed.



A TIME OF MISERY... ENDED

THAUG

When the soldier Valerius, who was loyal to Taramis, sheathed his sword in Salome's breast—through that scarlet half-moon—it was with such fury that the point stuck out between her shoulders, and she sank down. Yet, even as Valerius showed the true Taramis to her people, the dying witch-woman staggered into the light and cried out a name. "Thaug!" And, from deep within the temple came a vast dark form, rushing in great froglike hops—its eyes unearthly, its fangs and talons gleaming. But Conan's desert men loosed cloud upon cloud of arrows—and the monster rolled down the temple steps, "as dead as the witch who had summoned it out of the night of ages." Taramis was queen again, and Khauran could begin its ascent from the abyss.


SO SILENCE IS YOUR WEAPON NOW, IS IT?
IN TRUTH, YOUR RESIGNATION DOES NOT PLEASE ME!
YOU ARE NOT SO READY WITH YOUR TEARS AS FORMERLY!
YOU SHALL WRING NO MORE TEARS FROM ME, SALOME.
TOO OFTEN YOU HAVE REVELED IN THE SPECTACLE OF THE QUEEN OF KHAURAN SOBBING FOR MERCY ON HER KNEES.
WHY ELSE WOULD YOU HAVE SPARED ME THIS LONG-- OR LIMITED YOUR TORTURES TO THOSE WHICH WILL NEITHER SLAY NOR PERMANENTLY DISFIGURE ME?

CONAN CRUCIFIED!

When "Taramis" suddenly replaced her palace guards with Shemite mercenaries led by Constantius ("The Falcon"), announced that she planned to wed "the Falcon," and ordered her guards to disband, it was Conan who first saw through Salome's ruse. The Cimmerian captain of the guard interrupted those plans, as related to Ivga by the soldier Valerius:

"Men said he was off duty the night before, and drunk. But he was wide awake now.... He strode up to the palace steps and glared at Taramis—and then he roared: 'This is not the queen! This isn't Taramis! It's some devil in masquerade!'

"Then Hell was to pay!... I think a Shemite struck Conan, and Conan killed him. The next instant the square was a battleground.... I never saw a man fight as Conan fought. He put his back to the courtyard wall, and before they overpowered him the dead men were strewn in heaps thigh-high about him. But at last they dragged him down, a hundred against one.... I heard Constantius call to his dogs to take the captain alive—stroking his mustache, with that hateful smile on his lips."

THE CAPTAIN ON THE CROSS

Constantius could have had the barbarian killed then and there. Only a megalomaniacal streak can explain his decision to nail Conan to a cross nearly a mile from the towers of Khauran and leave him there to die. He decreed that anyone caught taking Conan, living or dead, from the "Tree of Death" would be flayed alive. He remarked that he had "seen men hang for hours on a cross, eyeless, earless, and scalpless, before the sharp beaks had eaten their way into his vitals." Then he rode off... so that the black vultures, wheeling in the reddening sky, would descend and begin their bloody work even before Conan ceased to breathe.

After a time, one vulture dipped lower... lower. Conan drew his head back, waiting with what the Chronicles call "a terrible patience." The bird's beak ripped at his chin—then, before it could sweep away, Conan's teeth locked like a steel vise on its wattled neck, until he crushed it with his powerful jaws and strong teeth. Conan let the limp carcass fall and spit blood from his mouth as the other vultures retreated.

PREY WITH TEETH
The terrified scavenger squawked and furiously beat its wings... its talons tearing at the Cimmerian's bronze chest -- but grimly he held on

RESCUE... AFTER A FASHION

Still, that triumph would have been Conan's last—and doubtless unrecorded by the Nemedian Chronicles, since dusk hid the sight from the city beyond... but there had been nearer witnesses, seated on horseback. Olgerd Vladislav, chief of the fierce Zuagir nomads, was impressed by the barbarian's toughness and ordered his men to cut down the cross. The impact of the battle-ax sent shudders of pain through Conan's swollen hands and feet—and when finally the cross toppled backward, he braced himself against the jarring impact that tore his wounds. When the nails had been drawn out of his hands, Conan managed to sit up unaided, and himself wrenched out the spikes that skewered his feet. Then he struggled to a standing position.

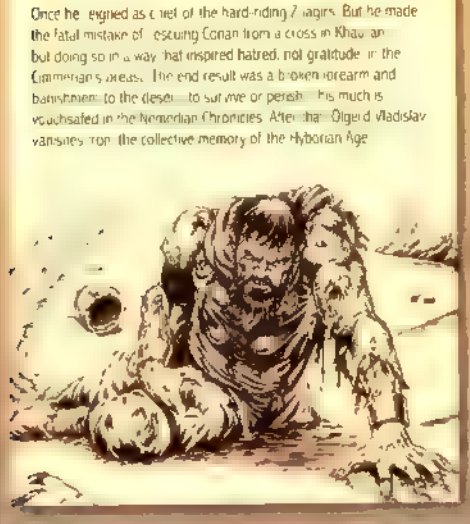
Olgerd watched impassively as Conan pulled himself atop a horse, then the chief whipped the beast so that it reared. But Conan, a rein wrapped about each hand, held on and forced his mount down. Finally, "swaying like a drunken man in the saddle," he followed the nomads toward the river—and life-giving water.

PAYBACK TIME

Miraculously, over the ensuing seven months, Conan's wounds healed, and he became Olgerd's lieutenant. He served the Zuagir chief well, but the method of his rescue instilled no

OLGERD VLADISLAV

Once he reigned as chief of the hard-riding Zuagirs. But he made the fatal mistake of rescuing Conan from a cross in Khauran, but doing so in a way that inspired hatred, not gratitude in the Cimmerian's breast. The end result was a broken forearm and banishment to the desert to survive or perish. This much is vouchsafed in the Nemedian Chronicles. After that, Olgerd Vladislav vanishes from the collective memory of the Hyborian Age.



CONSTA[illegible]

Constantius, also known as The Falcon, [illegible] adventurer exiled from his own kingdo[illegible] unspecified crimes. He became the [illegible] mercenaries "organized plunderers [illegible] according to Queen Ta[illegible]mis. Against her [illegible] she allowed him to bring his "black-bearded [illegible] Khauran, but confined him to a towe[illegible] their good behavior. He became Sulei[illegible] Taramis before she was imprisoned. He [illegible] delight in nailing Conan to a cross[illegible] not kill him outright. That was [illegible] one mistake—and certainly his last.

loyalty in the Cimmerian. And ever he dreamed of revenge on Constantius. Without Olgerd's knowledge, he gained the loyalty of the nomads and the support of three thousand Khauran men. Then he announced he was taking over as chief. When Olgerd tried to stab him, Conan grabbed his forearm—and broke it. He cast the wounded former chief out of camp, saying, "I gave you life, Olgerd, as you gave it to me." Without a word, the former chief rode eastward into the open desert.

A SECOND CRUCIFIXION

One morning a week later, it was Constantius who hung by nails on a cross outside Khauran. Conan, at the head of his white-robed Zuagirs, told the Shemite he would doubtless be dead by sundown. Civilized men were soft compared to barbarians, he declared. "Your lives are not nailed to your spines as our are." Then he left the self-styled Falcon to the companionship of another bird of the desert."

THE SLEEPER BENEATH THE SANDS

Olgerd Vladislav was not the kind of man to go gentle into oblivion. Although the Chronicles, like Conan, abandoned him in the desert, legends sprang up about his fate. Who can say with certainty that some of them are not true?

The Tree of Death

As [illegible] writhed, [illegible] made several spectacular [illegible] desperate attempts to tear his hands off the spikes that held him to the wooden cross, but the spike heads were too broad to be dragged through his wounds.

One such story says that Olgerd was nursed back to some semblance of health by a desert man and his bow-wielding daughter. He then killed the old man and ambushed Conan. But the oasis in which he had chosen to exact his revenge stood directly above the domain of a sleeping behemoth, which awakened and wreaked havoc on his plans. As he was being pulled underground in its tentacled embrace, he shrieked for Conan to loose an arrow and kill him, sparing him further torment. Conan raised his bow—then lowered it again. What had Olgerd done for him lately? The behemoth vanished with Olgerd into its realm.

THE MIRROR OF THE MANTICORE

However, some say that Olgerd fell unnoticed from the grip of the descending Sleeper. Not long afterward, a magical mirror repaired his shattered forearm, and he became the leader of an outlaw band, calling himself "The Tiger." Abandoning hopes for vengeance, he led them to Iranistan, intending to raid its treasury for drinking money.

THE FLAME KNIFE

As the fates would have it, Conan—his second confederation of kozaki and Vilayet pirates shattered by King Yezdigerd—soon found himself in Iranistan, in the fortress-city of Yanaidar. There, the Magus of a cult known as the Sons of Yezm was uniting the worshippers of various elder gods into an army bent on worldwide conquest. Conan discovered that the Magus' military commander—the man called "The Tiger"—was none other than his old enemy, Olgerd Vladislav. Conan resisted the Magus' hypnotic powers and slew him—and then, at the head of a force of Zuagirs, killed Olgerd, as well

Shamash-Shum-Ukin & The Citadel at the Center of Time

According to one legend cycle some time after his encounters with Constantius and Olgerd Vladislav, Conan and his Zuagirs raided a caravan out of the desert city of Akbitana. Out of a splintered cage bounded a huge tigerlike cat with teeth like sabers. It came, he learned, from a ziggurat known as "The Citade.," which had appeared overnight not long before, as if by magic. It was rumored that a powerful wizard dwelt within, one who paid for supplies with jewels of a kind not seen before. Deciding to view that ziggurat for himself, Conan rode off in disguise

THE CITADEL AT THE CENTER OF TIME

In the city he beheld a gigantic crossbow, its huge arrow pointed toward the desert wastes. A cleaver-wielding butcher said that one morning, it had simply been there— a gift from the sorcerer, apparently. Conan, however, had been recognized and was betrayed by a woman into the hands of the wizard, Shamash Shum-Ukin. Inside his ziggurat, the mage showed the Zuagir chief a carnivorous "dragon" that stood erect on two thick legs, with two tiny ones in front. He then spoke of glimpsing a future era when spires of shimmering glass reached skyward, the heavens were alive with flying galleys, and chariots raced to and fro, with no need of horses or oxen.

A Modern Barbarian?
In one variant of the legend Shamash-Shum-Ukin hurled Conan many centuries into the future, but Conan returned to slay the sorcerer at the same.

A LEAP INTO TIME

Conan was bound and lowered toward a well which seemed filled, not with water, but with star-strewn skies. Shamash-Shum-Ukin hoped to retrieve whatever beast or men of another era might slay the barbarian. But Conan fought free against time-lost creatures who were more than ape yet less than men. The great dragon wreaked havoc in the city outside, until Conan killed it with a shaft fired from the giant crossbow. Meanwhile, the magic that held the ziggurat together failed, and Shamash-Shum-Ukin leaped into the dark sky well, curious to see what lay on its nether side. Still uncertain of all he had seen, Conan rode off—while children frolicked on the huge reptilian carcass, and the enterprising butcher wondered how much Akbitanans would pay for cuts of "dragon steak."

Cherchez La Femme
even a woman who had betrayed him did not deserve death at the hands of savages torn from another time

THE DEMONESS FROM OUTSIDE

No man knows for certain how Conan came to leave the chieftainship of the feared Zuagirs. According to one tale, however, the chieftainship left him.

THE TRAP THAT FAILED

Boghra Khan, a Turanian noble eager to curry favor with the new king Yezdigerd, ambushed the Zuagirs in a desert defile. The nomads would have perished to a man there, as arrows rained down on them. But Conan charged straight up the slopes on a fiery stallion, and the sheer bravado of his action surprised and unnerved the Turanians. The Zuagirs won the day and sent a chastened Boghra Khan back to Aghrapur. Conan became obsessed with overtaking Vardanes, the Zuagir who had deliberately led them into the trap—even if the way to the traitor led through a haunted land.

"THE PLACE OF GHOSTS"

Conan had underestimated the Zuagirs' fear of ancient superstitions. One desert morning, he awoke from drugged wine to find himself deserted by his men, who left him only two goatskin water bags and his sword. Undaunted, he continued his pursuit of Vardanes to a city called Akhlat the Accursed. Enosh, a man with modest magical powers, told him that a demoness ruled there alone, stealing the life force from living men and women. Enosh hailed Conan as the liberator destined to overthrow the evil "goddess."

EVIL BEAUTY

Conan and Vardanes, and a sorcerer had used their powers to compel up a demon to shapeshift into a beautiful woman to help him seize power—a plan which ultimately backfired on him.

AGEING GRACELESSLY

The Demoness was old—very old. And when she lost the life force that she had stolen from so many bodies, young and old, she definitely began to look her age.

HEARTS—AND EYES—MADE OF STONE

Vardanes reached her first, and found a shriveled female mummy surrounded by stone statues of men, women, and children. He removed her death mask, and the mummy's third eye abruptly opened. Conan arrived just as Vardanes was turning into stone, the energy drained from him turning the mummy into the beautiful demoness. Conan felt his own limbs becoming heavy, stonelike—but he managed to avert his eyes and slice that evil eye, killing her. Conan refused payment from Akhlat's grateful people, saying that they would need it when caravans once more began to travel across the Red Waste. It did a man good, he mused, to be virtuous once in a while... even a Cimmerian.

THE STATUES SLEEP FOR-EVER NOW, IN GRAVES OF ETERNAL STONE.
AND CONAN TURNS AWAY, LEAVING THE EMPTY THRONE WITH ITS LITTER OF DUST...

ZABIBI, A.K.A. NAFERTARI

Jungir Khan ruled in Zamboula, a city in the Kharamun Desert, and men whispered that Nafertari, the satrap's mistress, ruled Jungir Khan. Perhaps she did, but she appears to have loved him, as well. When he was driven mad by a drug, she went looking for him on the city's dark streets, where Conan rescued her from the Darfar slaves who roamed free in the streets, seizing unwary travelers. She told him she was but a dancing girl named Zabibi, in search of her Turanian lover. She would pay Conan's price—her body—if he would help her. He agreed to a deferred payment. When they encountered the madman brandishing a sword, Conan felled him with his fist.

A TANGLED WEB

Zabibi had lied to the Cimmerian about other things as well. Planning to steal a ring known as the Star of Khorala from Jungir, she had obtained what she thought was a sleeping drug from Totrasmek, priest of Hanuman. Knowing that its magic could ensnare the hearts of the opposite sex, Nafertari planned to return it to Ophir, whence it came, but the priest had given her a drug that had driven him insane, instead.

THE MADNESS PASSES

With Conan's help, "Zabibi" gained the antidote to her mate's madness and administered it to the unconscious satrap. She revealed to Conan that she was actually Nafertari and that she had lied to prevent the rioting that would have broken out had it become known that Zamboula's satrap was a madman.

As mistress to the city's ruler, she could not pay the price she had promised Conan, but she gave him a small sack of gold and said she would have Jungir Khan make him a captain of the guard. Conan stalked off, unspeaking.

THE STAR OF KHORALA

Come morning, Conan was far from Zamboula, turning over in his hands a glimmering ring—the Star of Khorala. He had recognized "Zabibi" and her "Turanian" as Nafertari and Jungir Khan the moment he'd seen them—and he had slipped the ring off the satrap's hand after felling him. Nafertari was a beautiful woman, but Conan had the Star of Khorala and a sack of gold. A man couldn't have everything.

THE STAR OF KHORALA THE LEGEND CONTINUES

Precisely what happened to the ring Conan purloined from Jungir Khan is not recorded in the Nemedian Chronicles. Yet one tale has been told, by a scholar who studied the Cimmerian's life more than most, that he eventually reached Ophir with it and rescued its imprisoned queen. Of Nafertari and Jungir Khan themselves, nothing more is known for certain.

A DANGEROUS GAME

Nafertari was beautiful, bold, and resourceful, but her rash ventures in the streets of Zamboula nearly cost her dearly. Horrified, she is seen here amid the Darfar slaves' cannibalistic rituals.

TOTRASMEK, PRIEST OF HANUMAN

The story told to Conan by "Zabibi" was that Totrasmek, high priest of the ape-god Hanuman, had seen her dancing and lusted after her. He had and he did—but there was more to it than that. When Nafertari had asked him for a sleeping drug to slip in Jungir Khan's wine, he had given her instead a drug that would drive him mad. He wanted the Star of Khorala for himself—or at least, he wanted to prevent its being returned to the Queen of Ophir, who he said had once used that ring to enslave him. Since Totrasmek spun webs of power throughout the city of Zamboula, the queen no doubt had had political motives for her actions.

THE DANCE OF THE COBRAS

When Nafertari faced Totrasmek in his sanctum sanctorum, four jade-hued crystal orbs fell from the ceiling—and burst open to reveal hooded vipers, writhing menacingly about her feet. Only by skilled dancing could she hope to evade their venomous bite. But sooner or later, she would grow weary, and then...

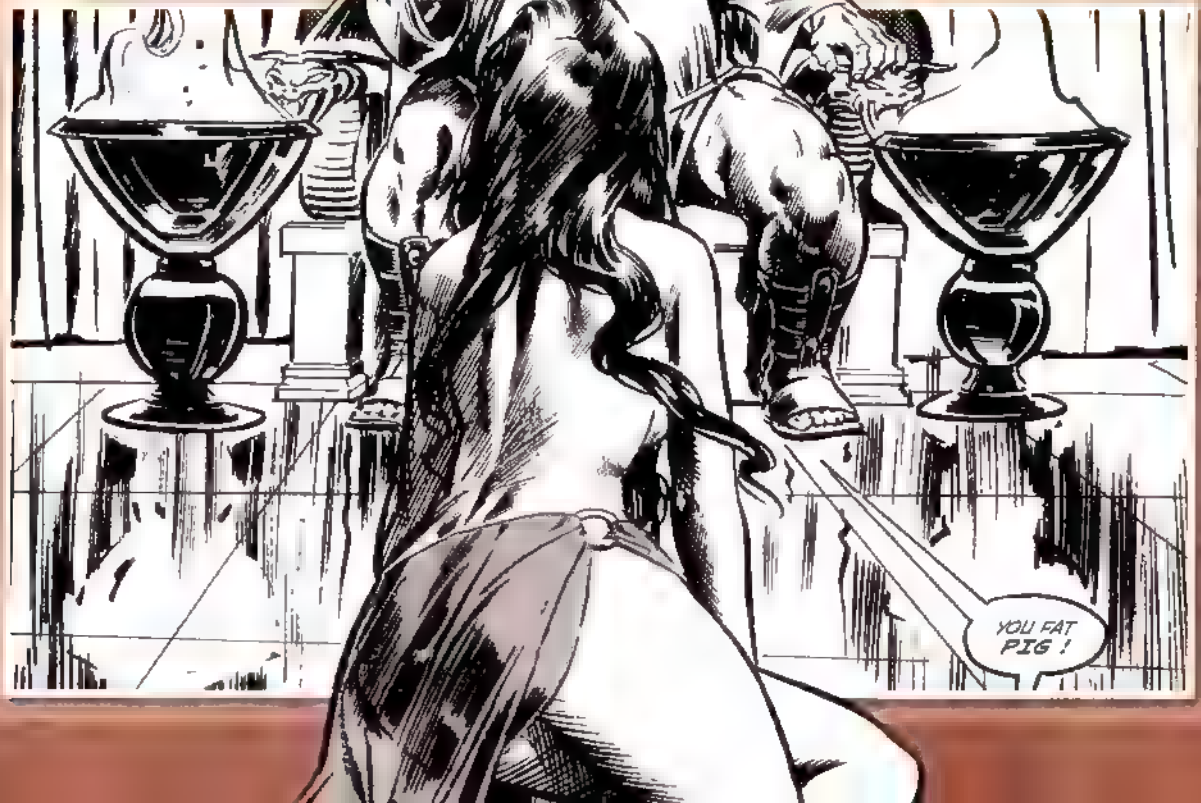
Totrasmek, watching her undulations, was breathing heavily—when suddenly he stopped breathing at all. Conan had stabbed him through the draperies, and the "cobras" turned back into the wisps of smoke they truly were. Totrasmek had hypnotized Nafertari, so that she would think them serpents and dance wildly for him. Perhaps he was just a dirty old man, after all.

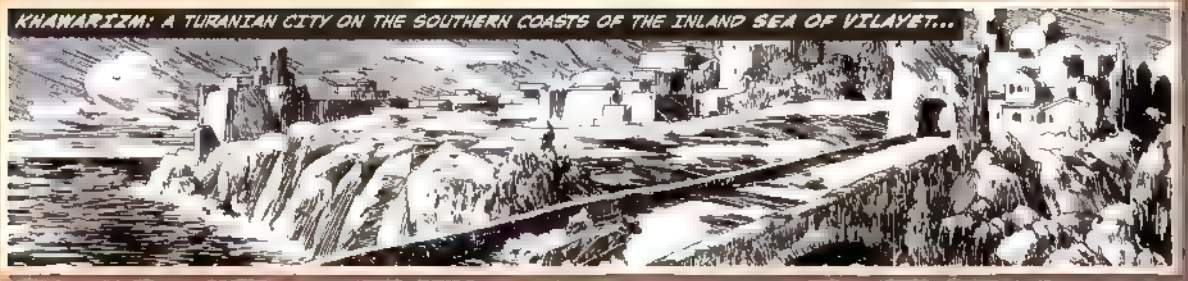
BLINDED WITH LUST

Although Nafertari was [illegible] the [illegible] dancer [illegible] the [illegible] Cimmerian had no [illegible] about send[illegible] this justly priestly [illegible] his maker.

BAAL-PTEOR

Totrasmek's enormous brown skinned slave had the largest hands Conan had ever seen. Baal-pteor was a strangler of Yoga Pong, chosen in infancy by the priests of Yajur and trained in the art of slaying with the naked hands—for Yajur loved blood and strangling wasted nary a drop. Over the years his hands had broken hundreds of necks, but when he laid his hands on the Conan's throat he gasped as the Cimmerian's fingers locked on his own. "Break the neck of a wild Cimmerian bull—before you call yourself strong," Conan said. "I did that before I was a full grown man... like this!" And then he snapped Baal-pteor's neck.





JEHUNGIR AGHA

King Yezdigerd was impatient with the lord of Khawarizm's inability to guard the Turanian frontier, so he dispatched a bitter complaint to its lord, Jehungir Agha, hoping to spur him to action.

THE RETURN OF CONAN

At the heart of Jehungir Agha's border problems was a certain Cimmerian. Some time before, having heard that kozaks were regaining some of their old vigor, Conan had ridden to rejoin them, bringing naught but his sword and the desire to lead them again. There remained among the kozaks a few of his old friends who remembered his former leadership, and what little opposition he did encounter was quickly pushed aside.

Their master again, Conan had wasted little time combining the loose confederation of kozaks with the piratical Red Brotherhood to create a formidable army.

TRIUMPH AND DISASTER

Jehungir Agha hoped that without their leader, the alliance of raiders harrying his lands would fall apart, so he lured the barbarian alone to the isle of Xapur for a liaison with a slave girl named Octavia. Anxious to be rid of Conan once and for all, Jehungir himself was on hand to witness to Conan's death.

But the island was home to a dormant evil that did not remain dormant for long—and only Jehungir himself escaped its fury. At this point, however, his luck ran out. On the cliffs overlooking the isle's shore, Conan finally caught up with him. And Khawarizm was soon in need of a new overlord.

City Under Siege

As the lord of Khawarizm, a Turanian city on the southern shore of the Inland Sea, Jehungir was charged with defending land and sea, both of which were exposed to attacks by Conan's forces.

A Call to Action

Jehungir Agha soon realized that his position as lord of Khawarizm was in dire peril when he received an angry letter from the king, written in his own hand—an unusual thing for a monarch to do in any age.

Khosatral Khel, the Devil in Iron

Once, long ago, a nigh-formless Thing called Khosatral Khel slithered up from the abyss and took on the substance of the material universe. But human flesh was too frail to contain it. So, although it took on the semblance of a man eight feet tall, it was composed not of blood and bone, but of iron. After conquering the primitives on the isle of Xapur, it guided the natives in the building of a great city called Dagonia.

When brutish invaders called the Yuetsh appeared, they were defeated by Khosatral Khel's sorcery—and for nearly a generation, survivors of the battle died on the altars of the Dagonia. But then a gaunt Yuetshi priest forged a knife from a fallen meteor, against which the iron giant's sorcery was impotent. Defeated, it lay helpless with the meteor-carved knife lying across its chest for untold ages.

THE MASTER AWAKENS

Freed from his bondage through a series of chance occurrences, Khosatral Khel restored his magnificent city to its former glory. The Dagonians, who had been dust for ages, moved again—yet they were only partly alive. By night they feasted and loved, as if in a dream; but with the coming of day, they sank into a deep sleep.

It was into this sinister and supernatural situation that Conan, the slave Octavia, and the Turanian troops led by Jehungir Agha wandered unsuspecting one night.

FIRST ENCOUNTER

The iron of which Khosatral Khel was composed moved like flesh—but it was still iron. When Conan first fought him, the giant's skin proved impervious to attacks from Conan's sword, while his strength made the Cimmerian marvel. He could only manage to blind his foe momentarily while he fled with Octavia. But prior to this encounter, Conan had overheard Khosatral Khel relating its origins to the Dagonians, and he'd learned of the existence of the one thing that could defeat it—the Yuetsh blade. But knowing of its existence and laying hands on it were two different things.

CUTTING IRON

After a battle with a 30-foot fanged serpent, which to the Cimmerian was nothing compared to the eldritch horror that was Khosatral Khel, Conan acquired the Yuetsh knife. When the behemoth charged him on Xapur's cliffs, he drove the enchanted blade again and again into the iron giant, as if it were mere flesh. A strange ichor flowed, and the giant fell, regenerating into the formless Thing it had once been. Then the towers of the reconstructed city of Dagonia reverted to the ruins they had been for thousands of years.

Octavia

The slave girl Octavia was a mere pawn in a larger struggle for power between Jehungir Agha and Conan. Having learned of the Cimmerian's weakness for women—surely not one of the best-kept secrets of the Hyborian Age—the lord of Khawarizm used a liaison with Octavia as the bait in a trap designed to destroy Conan on a mysterious isle. But there was far more waiting to ambush them on Xapur than any of them knew.

Alive Again!

When a Yuetsh fisherman's trophy curiously entangled with a lightning-struck tree, the meteoric knife was lifted from the breast of Khosatral Khel, breaking the spell that kept his fury dormant for millennia.

War Chief of the Afghulis

The precise manner in which Conan became a war chief of the Afghuli hillmen in Vendhya is not recorded in the Nemedian Chronicles. But it is known that under him, these fierce, give-no-quarter fighters were soon harassing both the King of Vendhya and the frontier-breakers of Turan, who were busily carrying out King Yezdigerd's policy of expansion. But a force that has enemies on either side is a force in danger of being crushed between the jaws of an irresistible vise.

IN HIS PATH LAY LEGENDS

For a leader of men, Conan, now in his early 30s, was unusually reckless. According to one legend of this period, he was caught in bed with Ayella, the "goddess-princess" of Kambuja, and promptly imprisoned. Luckily for him, she was soon abducted by a sorcerer named G'Humen Thak and taken to his stronghold on the border of Uttara Kuru. Conan was released on his solemn vow to rescue her, and riding at the head of a contigent of Afghuli warriors, he was as good as his word. Soon Ayella was back home, and G'Humen Thak lay dead.

And if not reckless, Conan certainly preferred to undertake dangerous missions himself, rather than delegating authority and risk. Alone on a bridge in an unnamed land between Vendhya and Iranistan, he encountered squat warriors demanding a toll. Conan decided to negotiate—with his broadsword

TRIBAL POLITICS

The Nemedian Chronicles do record that Conan was often more loyal to his hillmen than they were to him, as was the case in his encounter with Yasmina, Devi of Vendhya But given the intrigues that surrounded the throne of Vendhya at this time, perhaps the Afghulis may be forgiven for mistakenly blaming their tribal leaders' deaths on Conan. Regardless, when the dust cleared, Conan was once more riding at the head of the Afghulis.

OF DEEDS UNKNOWN

Few other tales are told, even in legend, of Conan's tenure as war chief of the hillmen, perhaps because there were simply no witnesses to any such exploits in the arid, treacherous outland hills of Vendhya. Be that as it may, Conan seems to have left the hillmen, under unknown circumstances, shortly after his adventures with the Devi of Vendhya.

Know Who You're Fighting
Selim Shah, leader of a band of Irakzai warriors, learned that it didn't pay to compete with Conan's Afghuli raiders—or, for that matter any force led by the Cimmerian.

Desert Intelligence
Jim Aghul, Conan's right hand man, learned that their success had inspired imitation... and competition!

THE DEVI YASMINA

Banda Chand, king of Vendhya, died at the hand of his sister, the Devi Yasmina. Believing that he was bewitched by the evil master of the Black Seers of Yimsha, he had begged her to kill him. During her subsequent reign in the capital at Avadhya, Yasmina became obsessed with destroying the Black Seers. No Vendhyan would approach their unholy mountain, but she had heard that the Afghulis' war chief was a fearless western barbarian. So she traveled to a northern province and declared that only the wizards' heads would serve as ransom for the seven hill chiefs the Vendhyans had captured. Alas for her, Conan kidnapped the Devi, thinking that he now had something to trade for his sub-chiefs—until he learned that black magic had killed them in their dungeon cells!

Before long, Yasmina herself was magically propelled to the lair of the Black Seers, where the Master of Yimsha informed her that Turan was behind her brother's murder. Through his dire magic, she relived all her former incarnations, from the dawn of time—and was subjected to all the woes and wrongs that man has wrought upon woman throughout the ages.

Fortunately, Conan arrived to rescue her, but when he rode out of Yimsha with her, he beheld his hillmen in desperate combat with a larger Turanian force—even as Vendhyan troops approached.

Yasmina said that if Conan would give her his horse, she would lead her men and together they would crush Turan's force. She kept her word, and the Turanians were smashed between hillmen and Vendhyans.

THE RANSOM

When Devi and barbarian parted, she offered him 10,000 pieces of gold as her ransom. He replied that he would come to collect it at her palace, bringing 50,000 men with him to see that the scales were fair. She laughed: "And I will meet you on the shores of the Ihumda with a hundred thousand!" Then Conan lifted his hand, to indicate that the road was clear before her.

"THE TEST OF ARISTOCRACY..."
Although reared in a palace, Yasmina was defiant toward her Turanian captor, but she adapted well to the lowly mud-brick ways of the hill country—and he admired her for it.

In Black Peril
Transported to the stronghold of the Black Seers by a mystic crimson whirlwind, Yasmina was subjected to horrific torture, and then a shrieking specter grasped her, [illegible] was bearing toward her ruby eyes.

The Black Seers of Yimsha

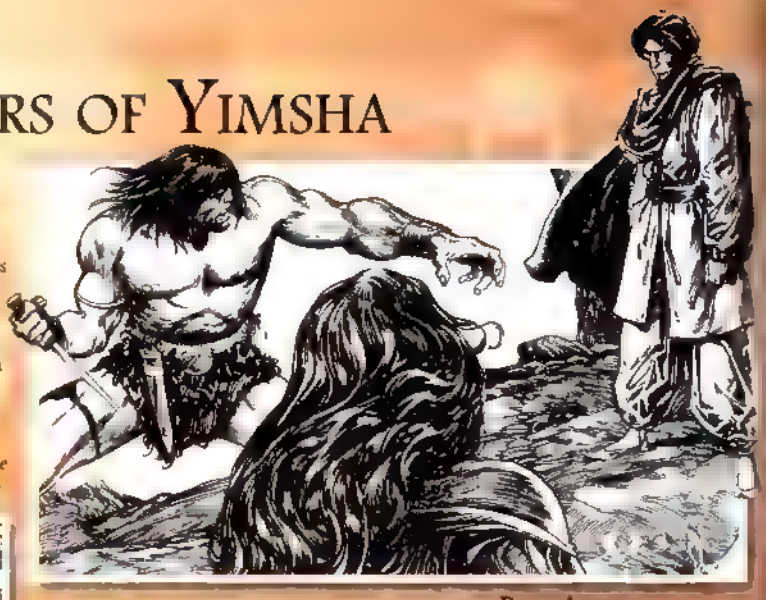
The Black Seers of Yimsha were a circle of four powerful sorcerers, but they were not without limitations. From their temple high in the Himelian Mountains, they could bring Bunda Chand, king of Vendhya, to death's doorstep using a single strand of his hair—but only when the stars were right.

They chose the adept Khemsa for a mission in the Peshkhauri province, but they could not see into his heart and recognize the ambition that would cause him to desert their cause for his own.

The Literal Downfall of Khemsa

Considerable was the power of Khemsa. An adept of the Black Circle, it was he, not the Seers, who strode calmly into the Peshkhauri prison and sent forth a luminous green fog that killed the seven Afghuli tribal chiefs. But by then, he was acting not on behalf of his Himelian Masters, but for himself and his paramour Gitara, who had convinced him to capture and hold Yasmina for his own gain.

--IT VANISHES, AS A BUBBLE VANISHES WHEN BURST.
AND THERE ON THE LEDGE STAND FOUR MEN--NOT GHOSTS OR PHANTOMS BUT MEN!
IN SILENCE THEY STAND, THEIR SHAVEN HEADS NODDING SLIGHTLY IN UNISON.
THEY ARE FACING KHEMSA-- YET BEHIND THEM, CONAN FEELS HIS OWN BLOOD TURNING TO ICE IN HIS VEINS.



And it was this same Khemsa who briefly hypnotized the Cimmerian in the Zhaibar Pass, but before he could deliver the death blow, his former masters, the four Black Seers, materialized before him. His betrayal had not gone unnoticed—and would not go unpunished. Four diabolical wills were slowly crushing him—then they turned their attentions on Gitara. With her death, Khemsa went berserk, flaming an ineffectual dagger at the wizards, before an entire ledge fell away beneath his feet and he toppled down into a chasm.

The Master of Yimsha

Lord of even the Lords of the Black Circle, as they were also known, was the Master of Yimsha. Once he had been an ordinary man, but no longer. After capturing Yasmina, he told her of the demons he ruled and said that "to hear from what far realm I summoned them and from what doom I guard them with ensorcelled crystal and golden serpents" would blast her soul.

Still, the Master of Yimsha was not above calls of the flesh, and he announced his intention to keep Yasmina alive as his slave. Seeking to break her spirit, he magically forced her to relive the pain and suffering of her countless past lives. Afterward, he sent a rotted, skull-faced apparition to ravish her... although it could have been the Master himself in one of his many forms.

Yimsha's Carpet

Sa'an was the name for the cone-shaped cloud, crimson veined with sparkling gold, that issued forth from the peak of Mount Yimsha and carried the four tall, black-robed men with "evil, owl-like" heads on their mysterious errands in the outside world.

Deadly Ambition

Even after Conan shook off the effects of Khemsa's hypnosis, it would have taken a mere touch of the adept's open palm to fell his Cimmerian foe like a slain ox.

Khemsa

Although powerful, this young adept's personal ambitions, stoked by Gitara, caused him to betray his former masters. His magic included hypnosis, a trinket that turned into a venomous spider, and the ability to transport himself through the sky on what he called a "horse-of-air." Although shattered in body after his final encounter with the Seers, Khemsa dragged himself from beneath a cairn of fallen rocks to give Conan a magic Stygian wristband and the secret to destroying the Seers ... then his soul went to join Gitara's in Hell.

GITARA

Gitara was royal maid to Yasmina and accompanied her on the dangerous journey to the Vendhyan province of Peshkhaur. But in secret, she was also the lover of Khemsa, a young mage who served the Black Seers of Yimsha. When Conan kidnapped the Devi, she talked Khemsa into betraying his masters and seeking to capture Yasmina himself. Later, when four of the Seers materialized in the hills it took no more than a glance to cause Gitara to walk casually off a cliff. As she fell to her death, the hypnosis was cruelly dissipated so that she sensed the full horror of her death plunge. This was her final payment for playing false with the Black Seers.

FATAL VISIONS

Many of the Black Seers' [illegible] mind-stress lies were actually mere illusions, but they appeared so real to their victims that [illegible] often frightened them to death.

FOUR DOWN . . . ONE TO GO

But although Conan lacked the supernatural powers of the Black Seers and their mysterious Master, he possessed an equally implacable will. Seeking to recapture the Devi, he traveled to the ominous Mount Yimsha and slew the acolytes who guarded the peak's approaches. Then, accompanied by the Turanian spy Kerim Shah and his men, he ascended to the peak and gained entrance to the temple itself.

The Black Seers mesmerized and beheaded several of the Turanians before Conan recalled the words of Khemsa. "Follow the golden vein through the abyss, and break the crystal globe." When he shattered the gleaming sphere that contained four golden pomegranates, the four Seers fell dead, but the Master of Yimsha had other tricks up his long flowing sleeve. At his gesture, the very heart of Kerim Shah burst out of his chest in a shower of blood and flew into the Master's outstretched hand.

ON WINGS OF DEATH

After rescuing the Devi from a huge serpent, Conan found bloody human footprints—not a snake's trail—on the marble floor and thought he had mortally wounded the Master of Yimsha.

Later, after Yasmina's troops had helped the hillmen smash the Turanian force that pursued them, the Master played his final, desperate card. In the form of a gigantic vulture, he swooped down, that great beak slashing for her soft neck. But Conan was quicker. When he stabbed the huge bird, it uttered a horribly human shriek and turned back into man-form—even as it plummeted to its death onto the rocks and river a thousand feet below.

The reign of the People of the Black Circle was ended, and Vendhya would once more decide its own destiny, unhindered by men who did foul deeds of murder by magic.

CONAN

SOLDIER OF FORTUNE

In one sense, Conan was always a soldier of fortune, fighting for no cause but one he chose for himself. Not long after facing the terrors of the Black Seers of Yimsha, he left the hills of Vendhya for reasons unknown and hired out his blade to various employers, cutting a swath of legends along the way.

TALES AND TALONS

Tales abound in which the Cimmerian accepted a commission from a village lord to rescue his daughter from a local warlord ... led a gang of marauders against a rival gang led by a woman warrior known as Snow Raven... fell under the spell of a great barbed blade that nearly made him kill a friend... had a brief liaison with a Bengala, a woman who could transform into a snow-white tigress with a star on her forehead.

If even half the legends are reliable, Conan and his savage sword had some strange employers. One of the oddest was an alchemist named Gaspard, who hired him to steal a balm made from man-crushing vines of Khitai—the final ingredient of his plan to turn base metal into gold. But when Gaspard's treachery led the barbarian to toss him to his own vicious watchdogs, Conan failed to notice that the liquid mess on the floor had turned to gold.

In another tale, he hired on with an untrained army in a region rebelling against a Zamorian under-king. Unfortunately, he wound up on the losing side. He was hauled before King Fhal, who noted his resemblance to icons of a minor war god called Shan. The two made a bargain in which Conan would impersonate the deity. The real Shan was not amused—and attacked Conan, who defeated him. Surely this was some lesser demon, and not a god. Still, when Shan's former devotees knelt before Conan, he savored the notion of being worshipped and rode away.

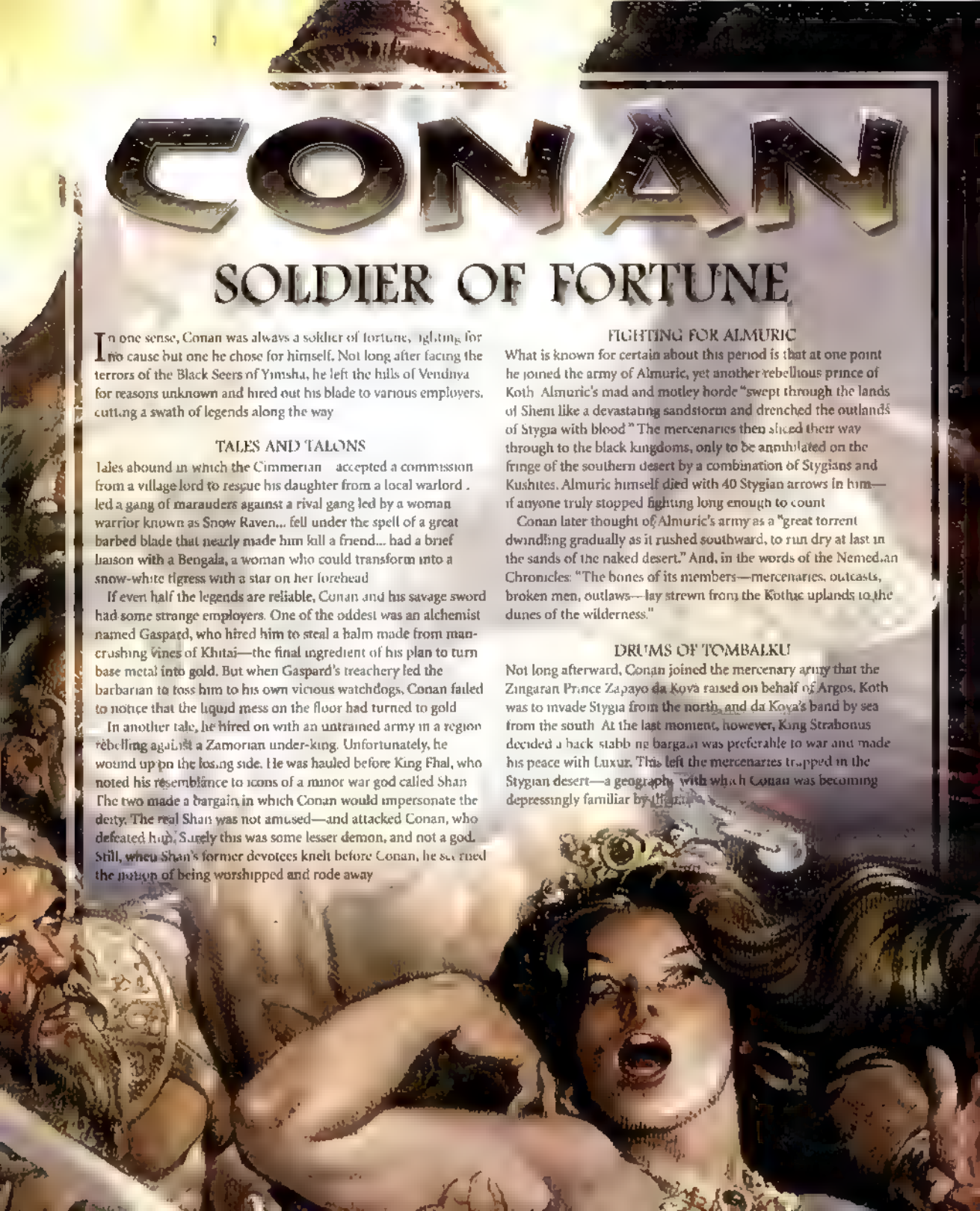
FIGHTING FOR ALMURIC

What is known for certain about this period is that at one point he joined the army of Almuric, yet another rebellious prince of Koth. Almuric's mad and motley horde "swept through the lands of Shem like a devastating sandstorm and drenched the outlands of Stygia with blood." The mercenaries then sliced their way through to the black kingdoms, only to be annihilated on the fringe of the southern desert by a combination of Stygians and Kushites. Almuric himself died with 40 Stygian arrows in him—if anyone truly stopped fighting long enough to count.

Conan later thought of Almuric's army as a "great torrent dwindling gradually as it rushed southward, to run dry at last in the sands of the naked desert." And, in the words of the Nemedian Chronicles: "The bones of its members—mercenaries, outcasts, broken men, outlaws—lay strewn from the Kothic uplands to the dunes of the wilderness."

DRUMS OF TOMBALKU

Not long afterward, Conan joined the mercenary army that the Zingaran Prince Zapayo da Kova raised on behalf of Argos. Koth was to invade Stygia from the north, and da Kova's band by sea from the south. At the last moment, however, King Strabonus decided a back-stabbing bargain was preferable to war and made his peace with Luxur. This left the mercenaries trapped in the Stygian desert—a geography with which Conan was becoming depressingly familiar by [illegible]



A Truly Ancient Near East

ARGOS

Argosseans were arguably the most skilled sailors of the Hyborian Age. In the kingdom's chief port of Messantia, located at the western end of the Road of Kings, Conan, fleeing from the law, hopped aboard a merchant ship heading south. The fact that one happened to be departing at just the right moment suggests both that the number of vessels entering and leaving the port was considerable and that the Cimmerian led a charmed life, which seems almost beyond dispute. Little is known of Argos' backward heartland, except that its border with rival Zingara was strewn with ghoul-haunted forests. Small wonder those nations preferred to compete at sea

Messantia, Mon Amour
Messantia, where the Road of Kings ended and the Western Ocean began. The Argossean port was the crossroads of buccaneers who aspired to be legends

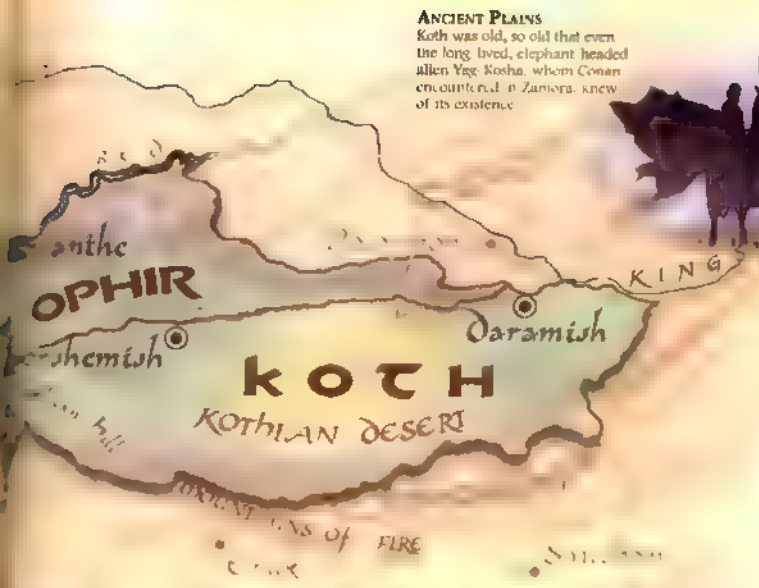
Mother Lode from Mother Earth
It seem's likely that the mountainous Ophirean frontier was the source of the kingdom's vast reserves of gold and precious stones.

OPHIR

Ophir was a kingdom of extraordinary wealth—a realm whose knights wore gilded armor, a most conspicuous extravagance. Those riches also paid for an army large enough to protect Ophir from its larger neighbors, such as Koth, Aquilonia, and Nemedia. In one infamous instance, Ophir betrayed an alliance with Aquilonia to join Koth in an invasion of the greatest of Hyborian kingdoms. It turned out to be a most unwise decision.

STYGIA

Stygia was a nation in decay. It held the dubious distinction as the kingdom with the most magicians per square league—as if its citizens' dedication to the serpent god Set was not enough to raise Hyborians' suspicions. One of its cities, Keshatta, was known as



Ancient Plains
Koth was old, so old that even the long lived, elephant headed alien Yag Kosha, whom Conan encountered in Zamora, knew of its existence

"...Koth that bordered on the pastoral lands of Shem.

suffered from a surfeit of civil war under penurious King Strabonus. After Conan became king of Aquilonia, his kingdom was attacked by an allied Koth and Ophir—with catastrophic results for the invaders. The only Kothian city mentioned in the Chronicles is its capital, Khorshemish, where King Conan was once imprisoned—very briefly.

Coils of Khemi and Khorshemish
Stygia had the dubious reputation of being the most "snake-infested" kingdom of the Age, but Conan never encountered a larger serpent than in Koth's royal dungeons

"the City of Magicians." As for the land itself, most of Stygia was desert, although arable, richly cultivated earth lay alongside the River Styx, which flowed north from jungles, then west for 2,000 miles to the city of Khemi and the Western Ocean. Luxur, Stygia's capital, was located on a tributary of the Styx. Since Stygians rarely allowed foreigners to set foot in their land, the thriving port at Khemi and the caravans trekking in all directions across Stygia's desert must have employed a virtual army of native-born men

KOTH

Koth is said to be one of the oldest of the Hyborian kingdoms, perhaps established by refugees fleeing the devastation in Valusia brought on by the Great Cataclysm. It is recorded that in those days Hyborians from Koth drove the ancestors of the Stygians into the lands south of the River Styx. In Conan's time, Koth

XUTHAL OF THE DUSK

Conan and the Brythunian slave girl Natala first came upon the mysterious lost city while seeking shelter from the harsh extremes of the Southern Desert. They immediately detected its weirdness when they found a yellow-skinned man lying near the gate as if dead. Dressed in silken tunic, his short sword sheathed in a cloth-of-gold scabbard at his side, he was cold to the touch—no wound upon him—yet he was untouched by decay. Confused and somewhat disquieted by the sight, they decided to enter the city anyway.

But they had only just passed by when the man arose and rushed at them—now alive and brandishing his sword—forcing Conan to sever his spine and toss the carcass down a well.

"A City of the Mad"

In the age of Conan the Cimmerian, the city of Xuthal is virtually a character in its own right. Conan himself called it "a city of the mad," filled with "damned degenerates," while the Stygian woman Thalis claimed the city was "actually one great palace."

TO DREAM, PERCHANCE TO DIE...

Within the city, they found fresh food and liquor set out, as if for a feast, and people rising at twilight to walk about as if in a trance. From the mysterious Stygian woman Thalis, they learned that Xuthal's inhabitants lived most of their lives in a dreamlike state induced by the juice of the fabled black lotus. During the day, they slept, showing not the slightest sign of sentient life. But according to her, they were filled with "exotic ecstasies, beyond the ken of ordinary men." Even so, the dream walkers united to attack the barbarian "desecrators."

He and Natala managed to survive the night but left town with the next dawn, when its denizens returned their death-sleep.

The open desert was a harsh environment, but it was better than the madness of Xuthal—and at least now they had plenty of wine and water!

And the Sun Beats Down...

On foot with supplies running low in the midst of the vast tracts of the southern desert, Conan and Natala had the choice of [illegible] or [illegible].

The Woman

The beautiful dark-haired woman who confronted Conan and Natala in the desert city of Xuthal identified herself as Thalis, daughter of a Stygian family [illegible] of Luxur. She claimed to have been initiated into the sensual mysteries of the dusky goddess she served by age [illegible], but in reality, a disciple of a rebel prince who perished in the desert. His method earned her a Kafkan Thalis, a kind dreamer who slept half their lives away, wanted Conan to be her lover, but he spurned her in favor of Natala. Thalis, however, would brook no refusal. She distracted Conan and trapped the Brythunian with a secret stone passage where she strung her up by the wrists intending to [illegible] her body. While [illegible] with a sword handled with [illegible] words, Conan did not see the cruel, hate-filled face of the witch-woman behind her until she was pulled into the sand and into a whirlwind. And thus perished Thalis the Stygian.

Thog

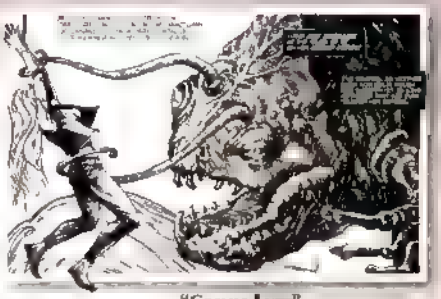
Thog was the god of Xuthal, a darkness that light would not dissipate. Its ever-changing, toadlike features were, according to the Chronicles, "as dim and unstable as those of a specter seen in a mirror of nightmare." It was a solid thing, the very outline of which changed subtly even as one looked at it.

When it reached out a dark tentacle to touch Natala's naked flesh, still dangling from the wrists thanks to Thalis, the girl knew such fear and shame as she had never dreamed of. And in that instant, she also knew, whatever form of life Thog might be, it was not a mere beast!

mouth, where its hot breath poisoned him. Tearing free, he ripped at the thing with his blade. When he managed to blind the thing, it toppled into a great round well from which no sound echoed back.

As he and Natala departed, she groused that he had caused their troubles by looking so admiringly at Thalis.

Conan snorted. "When the oceans drown the world, women will still take time for jealousy. Did I tell the Stygian to fall in love with me? After all, she was only human!"



"Cosmic Lust"
When Thog glared at the helpless Natala, it shook at the "cosmic lust" reflected in those great pools of light that could have been eyes.

Requiem for a God
Gleaming with sweat and blood, Conan shrugged off his wounds, saying, "Well, you can't fight a god! Out of Hell and come off with a whole skin!"

Farewell to Xuthal

Conan feared the supernatural, yet the sight of Natala in Thog's inhuman grip filled him with murderous fury—and he attacked. Tentacles pulled him into its

Natala

She was a Brythunian, who had been carried off into slavery—and then got lucky. Seeing her in the slave market of a city in Shem that Prince Almuric's army had stormed, Conan impulsively purchased her. Since this is the only time in the Chronicles when the Cimmerian is known to have owned a slave, it's presumed that either he found her blonde beauty bewitching or he pitied her (likely both). She was grateful, since it was a vast improvement over a fate as a Shemitish seraglio. After Almuric's force was butchered by Stygians and Kushites, the two fled across the burning desert. When their camel died, they continued on foot. Natala was touched when she was given the last of their water to drink, not knowing that Conan was grimly considering ending her life with a merciful swordstroke when he spotted the lost city of Xuthal not far off.

AMALRIC & LISSA

Amalric was the son of a nobleman of western Aquilonia, a soldier in the army of Prince Zapayo da Kova of Zingara, and a friend of Conan the Cimmerian—in that order

Lissa was a beauteous young woman of Gazal, a desert city whose buildings were a mass of ruins, except for a single red tower in its southeastern corner, where dwelt a supernatural monster that was feared and worshipped by the region's nomads. Gazal's people were a dying race. Lissa fled their stagnation, only to be captured by Ghanata bandits.

In the aftermath of defeat, Conan and Amalric had been separated, and Amalric had fallen in with the same Ghanata bandits who kidnapped Lissa.

Amalric killed them and took her back to her home. But when he arrived, he saw that the city's people had no heart either to fight or to flee the monster in the tower that devoured one of them from time to time. So he took it upon himself to rid Gazal of its terrorizer

Within the tower, he encountered a demon in human form As he drove his sword through its heart, it screamed horribly for vengeance and was answered by voices from the air. Amalric and Lissa fled the city, pursued by seven black-robed figures on gaunt black horses—ghouls summoned from the abyss by the demon's death cry. As darkness fell, the fiends overtook them, but then were swept away by Conan and riders from Tombalku.

A LOVE BEGUN
Amalric killed Lissa's kidnappers, saving her from a fate worse than death. For that she would love him forever

THE DEMON IN THE TOWER
Amalric [illegible] that terrorized Gazal, but in doing so, he [illegible] tower a curse upon himself

BEFORE HIM STANDS A GAUNT, NAKED THING-- HUMAN IN FORM, YET POSSESSED OF EYES WHICH ARE BALLS OF LUMINOUS FIRE!
IN THOSE EYES THE AQUILONIAN INSTANTLY GLIMPSES THE FIRES OF THE ULTIMATE HELLS!
THE CORPSE IS HEADLESS-- AND FEMALE!

AS HE GAZES UPON IT, A STREAK OF BLACK SPECKS-- BATS ON THE WING-- POUR FROM ITS HIGH BLACK APERTURES--
-- INTO THE GATHERING TWILIGHT!

The Red Tower's Curse

Soon afterward, the account in the Nemedian Chronicles break off. Later scrolls record an incident in Tombalku, a fabled desert city ruled by two black kings—one of whom just happened to be an old friend of Conan's. After his kingly comrade was slain, Conan and Amalric were battling the Tombalkans when they were abruptly attacked from the air by a bat-like creature that had likewise answered the death call of the demon in the red tower.

A Two-Pronged Curse

According to one legend, Amalric's curse brought bat-like beasts down upon Conan and himself, in addition to the seven ghouls that had pursued Lissa and him as they fled Gamul.

A Friend in Need

Amalric, for all his courage, would have fallen. But Conan's sword arm was both longer and stronger than the Aquilonian's, and he slew the loathsome thing. When, soon afterward, they spotted a caravan, Amalric and Lissa joined it, not caring where it was bound—while all the sand made Conan suddenly decide it was time to become a Barachan pirate.

CONAN

SCOURGE OF THE SEAS

Mention the name "Conan the Cimmerian" to either Hyborian Age scholar or neophyte reader and the image usually conjured up is that of a bronzed, battle-axe-wielding barbarian. Yet one role he assumed several times in both canon and fable was that of a pirate.

CONAN THE BARACHAN

After his wanderings to Xuthal and Tombalku, he made his way to the Western Ocean, where he was picked up by Barachan pirates, a loose-knit assemblage based off the coast of Zingara. Most of the so-called "Barachans" were actually Argosseans, who carried on their nation's sea-based rivalry with Zingara outside the law. Strangely, although Conan remained with the Barachans for some time, little is certain concerning his exploits among them, except the manner of his leaving them! But when did pirates ever take the time to keep a record of their plundering?

As ever, legend leaps in where the Nemedian Chronicles do not deign to tread. After an adventure or three, Conan is said to have assumed command of a vessel known as the *Hawk*, which was then sunk by pirates from Khitai. Later yarns have Conan sailing with them to the far off east, where he became embroiled in a deadly power struggle between the Stygian sorcerer Thoth-amon and a powerful pre-Cataclysmic mage. Supposedly, he was magically transported back west and dumped into the waters near Port Tortage. But some feel the scribe who recorded this cycle of legends was unduly influenced by the fumes of the black lotus when he committed it to parchment.

DOWN WITH THE SEA AND SHIPS

Other tales tell of the Cimmerian serving briefly on the *Red Hind* under Strombanni the Messantian, a Barachan pirate mentioned in the Chronicles. Strombanni was already seeking the fabled Treasure of Tranicos, as was his rival, the Zingaran buccaneer Black Zarono. As for Captain Conan, he seems to have had trouble keeping a ship under his sea legs. One, called the *Cockatoo*, is mentioned only because it was sunk by Zingaran. Eventually, his stint with the Barachan pirates came to an end. The Nemedian Chronicles relate that, having made even more enemies than friends, he had to slip out of a tight spot in Port Tortage by making a foredoomed attempt to row—and then swim—the Western Ocean!

FROM BARACHAN TO BUCCANEER TO BARBARIAN

Fortunately, before his arms gave out—and this, too, is vouchsafed by the Chronicles—he encountered the *Wastrel*, a freebooter. Events took their normal course, and Conan was soon in command of another pirate galley, this one Zingaran, not Barachan. In the eyes of some Hyborians, there was a fundamental difference between these two branches of the Red Brotherhood: the Barachans were outlaws pure and simple, while Zingaran buccaneers often acted under a loose commission from that kingdom's ruler, which mostly just encouraged them to plunder ships that flew any but the Zingaran flag.

A Cimmerian, Conan was reputedly more eager to prey on Zingaran shipping than most buccaneers were. Eventually, certain Zingaran ships brought him down off the coasts of Shem, and he was forced to escape inland. From this point forward, he again became a land-roving adventurer. But he left behind a bloody, sea-salted trail that would fill many a sea chanty for eons to come.

ISLES OFF THE COAST

BARACHAN ISLES

Also known as the Barachas, or simply Baracha, this archipelago in the Western Ocean lay some distance from the Zingaran coast. Baracha was the stronghold of bloodthirsty pirates who preyed on the shipping of every nation, but especially that of Zingara.

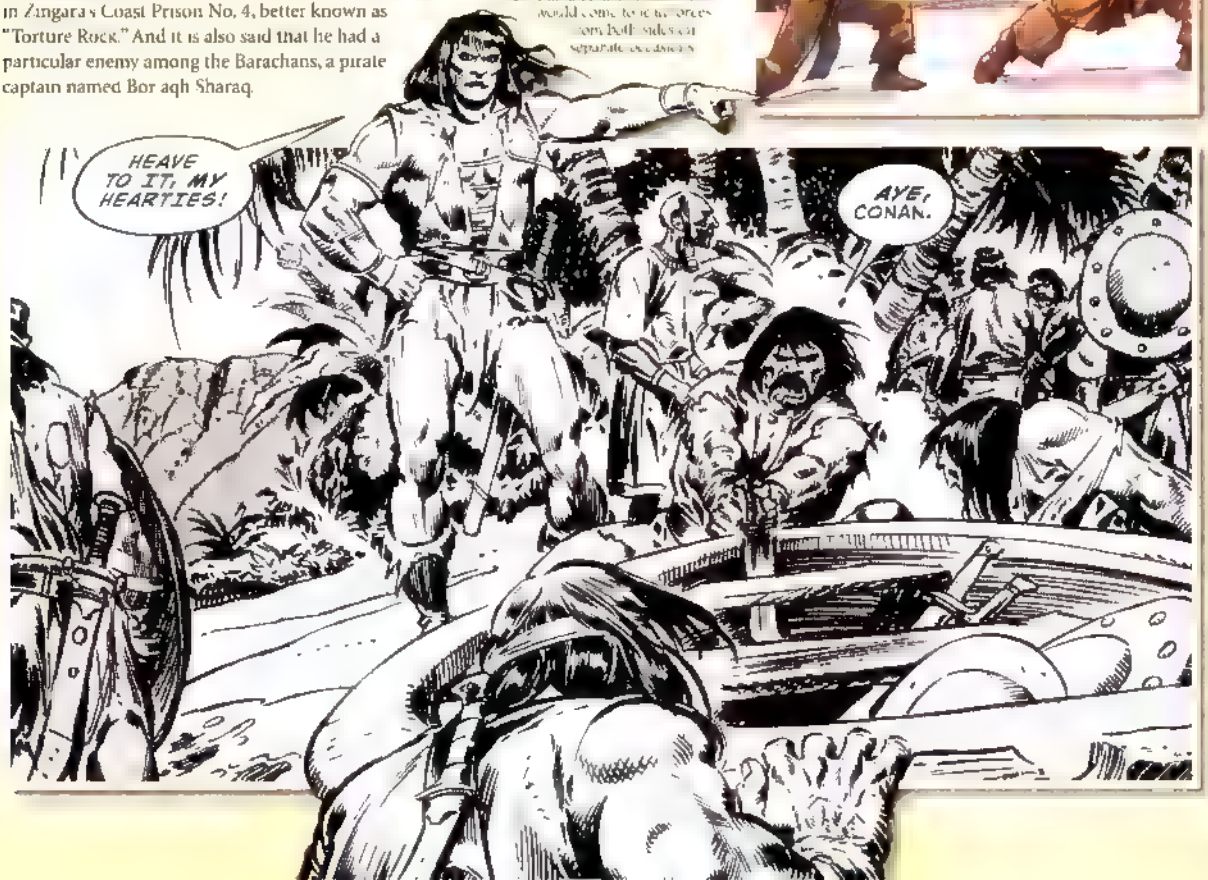
Woe betide the pirate who fell into Zingaran hands, for more than one ship's crew was executed in Kordava. Legend has it that even Conan was once captured after his own Barachan vessel was sunk. He was held briefly in Zingara's Coast Prison No. 4, better known as "Torture Rock." And it is also said that he had a particular enemy among the Barachans, a pirate captain named Bor aqh Sharaq.

CHIVALRY ASHORE...

"Zingara with its chivalry." Such is the reputation of Zingara according to its Nemedian chronicles, but despite that reputation, Zingaran sailors seem have often been employed as buccaneers.

...PIRACY ASEA

Argossean records describe several the Barachan Isles contracted with Zingaran privateers many years ago, which, that certain circumstances would come to the forces from both sides at separate occasions.



ZINGARA

...was a land ruled by minor princes, who paid mere lip ...ce to the crown at Kordava. Its seamen were often ...ates and its proud mounted warriors seemed always ...be engaged in bloody civil wars.

...s people were the mixed descendants of the ...habitants of the age old Valley of Zingg, Hyborian ...esmen, and Pictish invaders who crossed the Black ...l Thunder rivers. Since some believe the ancient ...ley dwellers to be of Shemitish origin, it is disputed ...ether or not Zingara is to be considered a "non ...borian" kingdom.

Numerous rivers flowed through Zingara, including ...e Aitmane, which also formed Zingara's border with ...ntain, one of Aquilonia's most powerful ...rov...nces. Aside from Kordava and one or ...o other great cities, it was a kingdom ...ostly of mountains, woods, and fields ...here farmers prayed to Mitra for rain.

Precisely how the love of the sea entered ...he Zingarans' veins cannot be known, but ...n Conan's time, that nation was engaged in a heated rivalry with neighboring Argos for trade supremacy. Each strove to build and maintain the largest merchant fleet in that part of the world. Yet it was the king of Zingara, not Argos, who gave semi-official status to buccaneers, or freebooters, by making them agents of the crown. The leadership of Argos was more prone to calling all such agents pirates—although no doubt there were many Argosseans who cheered wildly when they beheld a Zingaran galley sinking far out at sea, her prow and sails set aflame by a torch made in Messantia!

Urban Diversions

...

Pirates Will Be Pirates

When not preying on Zingaran shipping, Conan and the Barachan pirates often followed their noses to ports, where gold and women awaited.

PORT TORTAGE

In the Nemedian Chronicles, Tortage it is merely spoken about, not described, so legends have sprung up to fill the gap. It was the only settlement among all the Barachan Isles, which were spread out for hundreds of miles off Zingara's coast like a huge necklace of blood clots.

It is likely that Argossean pirates, fleeing from the vengeful navy of Zingara, Argos, or Stygia, were the first to set up a temporary settlement on the town's site many generations before Conan's time. Some shrewd seaman must have realized that this particular cove would be a good place to lie low for a while. Utilizing plundered supplies, perhaps even enslaved labor, Tortage eventually grew from a few ramshackle huts to a sizable village. Of course, how many of its "inhabitants" were in town surely varied widely from one moment to the next.

PORTRAIT OF A PIRATE PORT

No crops were cultivated or harvested in Tortage. The place almost certainly survived solely on the pooled stores of the ships in port. Besides living quarters for captains and crews, there was doubtless a bar that dispensed grog and even food "liberated" from vessels seized or sunk. Chances are, some entrepreneurial pirate realized it would be more profitable—and far less dangerous—to devote himself to such goods and services, rather than braving the storms and swords one

GONZAGO

Captain Gonzago was apparently a gentleman of independent means, though admittedly of dubious ethics, when he first appears in the Nemedian Chronicles, that we hear of him as Zingaran who sailed with the Barachans. He made Conan second mate in his ship, the *Hawk*. At this time, it was believed that a Stygian sorceress named Siptah controlled the elements, and perhaps knew almost everything. When rumors began to circulate that Siptah was dead, Gonzago was persuaded by wagging tongues and a belief in his own invincible luck to sail to the island. But his luck had run out. As he and part of his men, in the jungle, a shadow swooped down in the moonlight. Then stalked toward him with gleaming talons on the end of batlike wings.

DRINKING THE PROFITS

[illegible] Conan and the remaining crew of the *H*[illegible] were there [illegible] a [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] for a little carousing in Port Tortage.

might encounter at sea. Perhaps clothing, too, was exchanged for coin of the realm—any realm. Nor does it seem beyond possibility that a few women found their way to Tortage from time to time—mostly as captured passengers—and wound up practicing a profession that was old when Atlantis was young.

TALES OF TORTAGE

Tortage's legends involve some of the most colorful of the pirates: Strombanni, brutal master of the Red Hand, Black Zarano, a Zingaran buccaneer rumored to have sailed for a time with the Barachans, and Conan the Cimmerian. There was the night Conan and Red Ortho, a grossly huge pirate, got into a slugfest that ended with a powerful uppercut—and the barbarian shearing off Ortho's beard just to show him just how dead he could have been. Or the group of pirates who rescued what they thought were three beautiful maidens, but who turned out to be mesmerizers bent on sacrificing the Barachans to a soul-eating demon. Or the time when Tortage, left nearly deserted, was taken over by Zarano's Zingarans, until they were driven out by Conan, with a bit of help from a burly barkeep.

A MODEST UNDERTAKING

A pirate's tale survives which suggests what dire circumstances led Conan, one night, that his wisest recourse to a sore throat was to attempt to make it across the Western Ocean alone. The reasons for his choice are unknown, but the results are chronicled...

A HISTORY OF DECADENCE

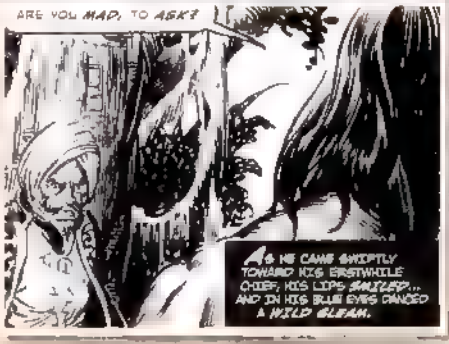
Tortage and its depravity may have [illegible] Trimeos made his name as the greatest of Barachan pirates.

THE BAT-THING

For longer than anyone knew, the loveless Tower of Siptah had stood on the nameless [illegible] coast of Stygia, where seafarers left tokens of goodwill in exchange for [illegible]. But when Conan saw Captain Sarkela kneel [illegible] dream by a [illegible] half-human and half-bat, he decided to smoke Siptah out. He and the crew of the Hawk set fire to a wall of logs around the base of the tower, and as the [illegible] flames closed in, [illegible] gargoyle swooped low in the [illegible] above. The bat-thing [illegible] man after man with razor talons, but Conan [illegible] it as it flew [illegible] the parapet and plunged his dagger into its head. In the tower he found Siptah seated before [illegible] crystal gem—he was dead. But the bat-thing was not. It attacked again and again [illegible] Conan shattered the gem, killing it.

ZAPORAVO

A ruthless Zingaran buccaneer—also called "freebooter"—Zaporavo the Hawk was a dreamer of vague, grandiose dreams. By night, he would pore moodily over ancient charts, maps, and crumbling books, often speaking wildly of lost continents, of unguessed islands where horned dragons guarded treasure gathered eons ago by pre-human kings. In the final weeks of his life, he ordered his ship, the *Wastrel*, to leave all coasts behind, plunging further, ever further out into the unknown vastness of the Western Ocean, bound for an island where a faded parchment said he would find treasure.



DEATH FROM THE SEA

He made his first and last mistake with Conan the day the Cimmerian climbed from the sea onto his ship. He could have had killed him then, as a mere castaway. But he did not—and Conan gave him no further provocation. Instead, by proving himself a skilled, strong, and daring sailor, he made himself valuable to the ship—and liked by its crew. But when Zaporavo went ashore on a shallow bay with a few men, then ventured alone into the forest, he gave Conan his chance. The barbarian stealthily followed him, challenged him, and killed him.

...AND A MUTINY

Zaporavo's greed and delusions of grandeur came to an end when the Cimmerian decided that the *Wastrel* was in need of a new captain.

THE SPOILS OF WAR

The pampered daughter of the Duke of Kordava, Sancha, was plundered from Zingaran ships by Zaporavo who preyed on any vessel that crossed his path.

A RECKONING

When Zaporavo went ashore alone into the forest, he gave Conan the opportunity he needed.

THE *WASTREL*

Zaporavo's carack or galleon had seen more than its share of action in the Western Ocean, having done battle with the Argossean navy and possibly that of Zingara, as well, on occasion. After Conan slew Zaporavo in the forest, the Cimmerian became master and captain of the *Wastrel*. And following his harrowing adventures at the Pool of the Black Ones, he stood upon her decks and surveyed the surviving buccaneers. They, in turn, remained uncharacteristically silent—as silent as a band of carousing, bloodthirsty buccaneers can be, anyway—as he spouted his crude philosophy regarding ships and seamen. "A paltry crew, and that chewed and clawed to pieces," he said, "but they can work the ship, and crews can always be found." Conan bore no sentimental love for any mere construction of wood and sail.

The Black Ones

Their origins, unlike those of many of the eldritch entities Conan encountered over the years, are not ... ever or even hinted at, in the Nemedian Chronicles. Was it they who built the great palace in the middle of the island forest? Though ebon-skinned, they had no more in common with the tribes of the Black Coast than with Hybornians. Their one source of delight seemed to be their strange and sinister rituals.

MUSIC HATH CHARMS...

When Conan first beheld them, there in an open courtyard beside a green pool, one of their number was playing a pipe-like instrument, its music forcing a captive Zamorian to dance spasmodically. Then the piper thrust him headfirst into the pool, and the man shrank into a tiny figurine only inches high — to be displayed upon a ledge beside other figurines of many racial types. When the creatures had departed, a second Black One arrived — carrying a terrified Sancha. Conan freed her, but soon the other giants returned, this time carrying the comatose crew of the *Wastrel*.

PLAYING FOR TIME

Hopelessly outnumbered, Conan ordered Sancha to awaken the pirates while he led the elder giants on a merry chase. Alas, he soon found himself cornered — but the Zingarans came to his aid in the nick of time. Black Ones and buccaneers alike perished that day. And then the giants' leader gave out an inhuman cry—the only sound made by one of his race during the battle—and leaped into the air, where he hovered above the pool.

TORRENTS OF DOOM

Then, the jade-colored waters shot upward from the pool, enveloping him in a great green liquid column that went up, and up. Conan shouted to the pirates to flee—just as the pillar burst and a thunderous torrent spewed forth. He knew that, if those waters washed over them, the men would be turned to stone! But they made it back to the *Wastrel* and sailed away. Would the Black Ones live on, or die as the waters of the green pool dissipated? Conan did not know... nor did he care to find out!

Interrupted Ritual
Conan was wild with joy to find that his sword could harm — and kill — the Black One who was about to hurl Sancha into the pool, but he could never hope to kill them all.

Body Snatchers
Even the least of these tall, gaunt beings known as the Black Ones would have towered over Conan, as the Cimmerian did over other men.

Sancha

Although a captive aboard the *Wastrel*, Sancha was adaptable and clever, and she had survived where other women would have long since been disposed of. But the sight of the mighty-thewed, half-naked Cimmerian climbing over the railing like a bronze merman had reawakened something in her. Suddenly restless, she refused to stay on the *Wastrel* and instead swam to the island where Zaporavo sought treasure. Further inland she stumbled upon Zaporavo's corpse— and one of the island's inhuman inhabitants. She proved her worth when Conan ordered her to shake the sleeping crew awake, and afterward, she sailed the seas willingly with him. In time, the two went their separate ways.

PRINCESS CHABALA

The legends say this princess of Zingara was a beautiful young woman She was also a dutiful daughter who wanted to help her magically stricken father, King Ferdrugo. But Villagro, Duke of Kordava, hoped to marry Chabala and become ruler upon Ferdrugo's death, so he sent Conan's old nemesis Black Zarono to kidnap her at sea. As fate would have it, Zarono had recently stolen a treasure map from Conan, and the Cimmerian was already hot on his trail On a nameless island, Chabala, Conan, and several marooned seamen formed an alliance to recover the treasure that Zarono had recovered. In doing so, they also made safe the throne of Zingara Afterward, Chabala asked Conan to become her consort But he had no interest in becoming a Zingaran gentleman, "wearing a scented handkerchief as I watch the royal ballet troupe perform —so I delighted it back to sea

TSATHOGGUA

When Zarono first saw it in the ruined temple on the mysterious island Tsathoggua appeared to be a mere stone idol half-man half-toad Yet it radiated such cosmic evil that even the ruthless buccaneer and his man Menkara the Stygian were repelled by it. They hurriedly made off with some treasure and the unholy *Book of Skelos* Conan arriving late faced the full fury of the toad-thing when it came to life With no treasure to fight for, Conan made a leap for life into the sea The cliff collapsed under the pursuing idol's bulk and it shattered on the rocks far below

ALWAYS A COMPLICATION

As Conan learns [illegible] and adds [illegible] Princess Chabala [illegible] Queen [illegible] that was no exception.

Sigurd

By the claws of Nergal and the guts of Marduk!" as Sigurd himself would have said. This great red-bearded Vanir probably reminded Conan of his old comrade Fafnir. Although he hailed from Vanaheim in the distant north, Sigurd had fallen in with a band of Barachan pirates who were down on their luck. He and several Argosseans were marooned on the treasure isle when Conan, Chabala, and Zarono all decided to pay the place a visit.

Soon Conan and Sigurd were fast friends, and they formed an alliance with Chabala, bent on saving King Ferdrugo. This they did—foiling both the Duke of Kordava and that Stygian mage of mages Thothamon, if the legend is to be believed. Years later, when they were both a bit older, Sigurd would play yet another part in Conan's life...

PRINCESS
WOULD YOUR ROYAL SIRE MIND?
CURSE AND IT HIMSELF, KING SIGURD!
AT FIRST I WAS FULL OF SHAME. BUT THEN WE
SKIN IS ONLY SKIN, AFTER ALL

Teat for Tat
Sigurd's tendency to curse in pairs of oaths amused those around him, especially Conan.

A Boatload of Thanks
Ferdrugo rewarded Conan and Sigurd by commissioning the building of a ship, in which the two sailed away, now buccaneers for the Zingaran crown.

CONAN

SOUTH OF STYGIA

After such a long spell at sea, the Cimmerian was ready for a place where the surface he stood on did not pitch and sway with each rising and falling of the waves, and where his world was not limited by the distance from prow to stern. There were reports that, while heading eastward through Ophir, he became embroiled in a dispute between two military units: the Black Cloaks and the Iron Maidens, a band of armored women. But his ultimate destination would be the lands south of serpent haunted Stygia. Hearing that wars were in the offing along the Stygian border (and when were they not?), Conan joined another armed force—one that bore a familiar name.

THE FREE COMPANIONS

In Conan's day, "The Free Companions" was apparently a common designation for mercenary companies. Once—was it really a decade earlier?—Conan had fought for a group that went by the same name. With them, he had raided the borders of Koth, Zamora, and Turan. After signing on with the new Free Companions, he was dispatched to the post at Sukhmet, which guarded the frontier between Stygia and Darfar. There, he served under a man named Zarallo, but he soon grew weary of the inactive life. When a female soldier of fortune called Valeria left the camp for the mysterious kingdoms far to the south of Stygia, Conan followed her—with more on his mind than a bit of fresh air. That pursuit led them to the time-lost city called Xuchotl.

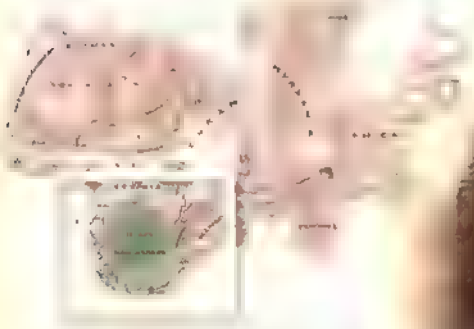
TWO FOR THE ROAMING

Only legend fills in the details of what happened after Conan and Valeria left Xuchotl. One cycle of tales has them caught up in yet another blood feud, this one involving two native tribes, a gigantic, intelligent Golden Serpent, and a "god" known as the Living Wind. By this time, they'd seen enough of the jungle, so they headed north to renew lives of piracy. It is doubtful, however, that the two of them would ever have been able to agree on which was to be captain. At some point, Conan and Valeria went their separate ways, and there is no record in the Nemedian Chronicles of their ever meeting again.

ALWAYS TIME FOR A TREASURE HUNT

Alone again, Conan's next stop was Keshan. Somewhere in that kingdom was ancient city of Alkmeenon, in whose lost ruins lay the priceless treasure known as the Teeth of Gwahlur. In order to remain in Keshan while secretly searching for these jewels, he volunteered to train its armies and lead them against their hereditary enemy, the neighboring kingdom of Punt. Border skirmishes gave him ample opportunity to prove his fighting and leadership prowess. In the end, he headed north out of Keshan—without the jewels, but, naturally, with a woman.

East and South of Kush



THE BLACK KINGDOMS

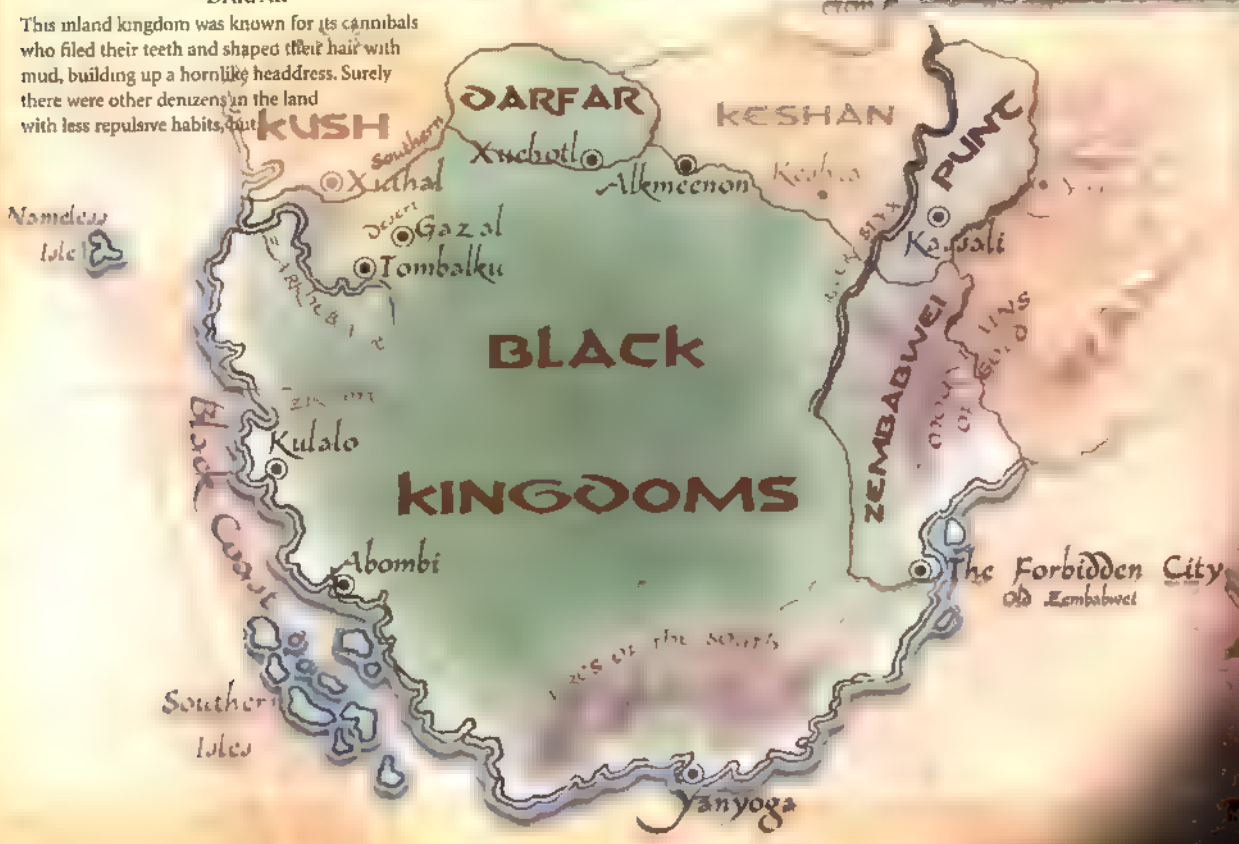
South of Kush lay a land largely unmapped by Hyborian cartographers. There is only one city along this vast coastline whose existence is affirmed by the Nemedian Chronicles. Abombi, a town once sacked by Conan and Bêlit. Two other cities, Kulalo and Yanvoga, are spoken of in later legendry. The black corsairs' home islands lay off the far-southern coast of this region.

A Tale of Lost Cities

The vast jungles and swamps of the lands south of Stygia were home to numerous lost cities [illegible] and rarely uninhabited.

DARFAR

This inland kingdom was known for its cannibals who filed their teeth and shaped their hair with mud, building up a hornlike headdress. Surely there were other denizens in the land with less repulsive habits, but



harp-fanged Darfars ... retained their ...weet tooth for "long pig" even ...fter they had been carried off by ...avers from Shem.

PUNT

Bordered partly by the River Styx, Punt was blessed with an abundance of precious metals found in its portion of the river. Its people worsh.pped an ivory goddess. Like the other black ...ingdoms, Punt was often subjected to raids by slavers from Stygia and Shem

ZEMBABWEI

Zembabwei was perhaps the most powerful of these southernmost kingdoms, and was said to be ruled by "twin kings." Virtually nothing is known of this rising empire in the south, a...hough some legends say its people worshipped the Stygian serpent g...e Set under the alternate name Damballah

UNKNOWN SOUTH

...vor... N...ndar... ...ther... ...ts sp...w pr... ...ion ...south, South... ...they were ...like ... ...black ...ngdoms ... ... Amazons. ... ... The Amazons, ...whereabouts of Zembabwei.

"A Man's Life"
Although she desired to "live a man's life," Valeria was too attractive, too voluptuous, to be left alone when surrounded by the kind of men who lived for battle and

Valeria

Like Conan, the Aquilonian swordswoman named Valeria had sailed with the Red Brotherhood—although, by this time, that term also applied to pirates of the Western Ocean, not merely those of the Vilayet Sea. Valeria had a rather unrealistic view of how she should be treated by warlike men, whether buccaneers or garrison soldiers.

Farewell to the Sea

Nothing is known of Valeria's life before she sailed with pirates—probably Barachans rather than Zingarans. When a pirate named Red Ortho wanted to make her his mistress, she jumped overboard one night while their ship was anchored off Zabhela, on the coast of Kush. Learning that one Zarallo had led his "Free Companions" south to guard the Darfar border, she joined a caravan headed east. No doubt she had to prove her martial skills to a skeptical commander at Sukhmet... but clearly, she made the grade.

Woman, Thy Name Is Temptation

It was the proclivities of women-starved men, once again, that led to her abruptly leaving Sukhmet. A Stygian officer tried to assault her—and she fatally knifed him. Since Sukhmet was within Stygia's borders, Zarallo could do nothing to protect her from Stygian justice—or Stygian revenge, whichever got her first. So she plunged south, eluding patrols sent out to haul her back. The dead man's brother managed to follow her trail. But Conan slew him before Valeria knew that either of them was pursuing her—the Cimmerian for his own less-than-noble reasons.

The Red Dragon

After fleeing Sukhmet and being rescued by Conan from a vengeful Stygian, Valeria took a liking to the Cimmerian. They became comrades rather than lovers, a relationship that was solidified during their battle with a huge beast, which they called a "dragon." In truth it resembled a prehistoric stegosaur, but it differed from that ancient giant in one key area: it was no herbivore.

Valeria by Any Other Name

Although little is known of Valeria's early years, legends fill that intriguing void. According to some, she was born Merina, daughter of an Aquilonian nobleman, whose wife died in childbirth. Little Merina learned swordplay and archery from two warrior-women while accompanying her father on a diplomatic journey to Turan. Captured briefly as a child by the Red Brotherhood, she was given the name of Valeria by her pirate adopter.

After her father was killed by a Turanian, Valeria was reared by an uncle who used her

inheritance to buy merchant ships in Zingara and arranged for her to wed a wealthy Kordavan. For that, she stabbed her uncle in the leg, cut her hair, and, pretending to be a young male named Val, joined the crew of a seagoing Zingaran galley.

According to this cycle, she first encountered Conan when he was second mate on Strombanni's ship. While boarding a Zingaran vessel, the Cimmerian dutifully saved Strom from being knifed by slugging his attacker in the jaw. When the unconscious sailor's shirt fell open, all discovered Val's secret. Later she prevented Strom from being gutted by his rival, Black Zarono, and was accepted as a full-blooded crewman.

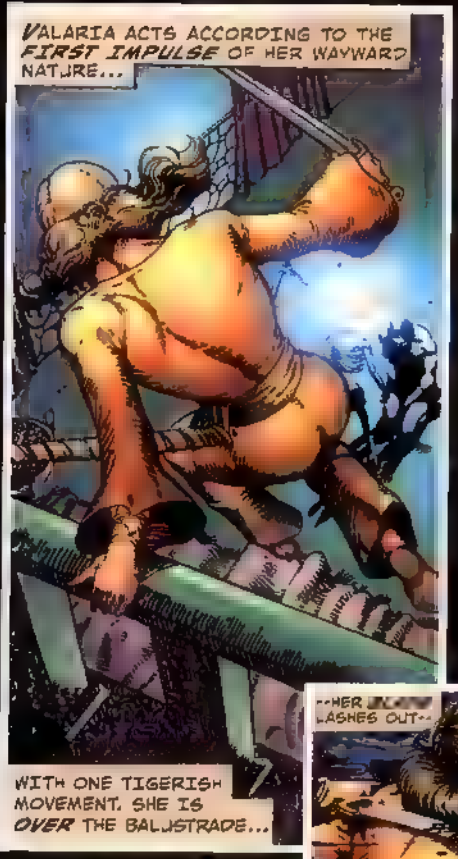
BARACHAN DAYS

Valeria and Conan shared an adventure or three amongst the Barachans. Together they faced the hulking part-alligator, part-hippo, part-leopard known as the Devourer of the Dead, "liberated" a jeweled idol from Messantia, and overcame the seductive wiles of three women who schemed to sacrifice the entire pirate population of Tortage to a monstrous Soul-Eater.

One day Conan learned that Red Ortho had invited Valeria to be first mate on his ship. If Conan knew Ortho, he meant for her to be more mate than first.

THE RED BROTHERHOOD

The [illegible] that. There were some seventy of them, a [illegible] men from many nations. Kothians, Zamorians, Corinthians, Shemites," with no common [illegible] save the lung of Turan. When Conan encountered [illegible] he was more than happy to do away with the [illegible] enemy. Sergius of Khoshia and assume command of the crew. "We'll scorch King Yildiz's pantoons yet, by Crom," he roared with a lusty laugh as they sailed off to stain the blue waves crimson. And so they did, until the Brotherhood deserted him outside Khawarizm. Well, it was to more than he should have expected from a bunch of pirates!


VALARIA ACTS ACCORDING TO THE FIRST IMPULSE OF HER WAYWARD NATURE...
WITH ONE TIGERISH MOVEMENT, SHE IS OVER THE BALUSTRADE...

VALERIA IN SONG AND STORY

No mean swordswoman herself, in time Valeria became the center of her own cycle of sagas. In them, she faced adversaries as fearsome even as the skeletal warrior that accosted her the night she and Conan entered Xuchotl.

A LEGENDARY TEAM

Perhaps no adventure Conan and Valeria shared could compare with the epic known as "Red Nails." Even so, legends tell of the pair's exploits from Baracha to the Iron Tower of Tarantia.

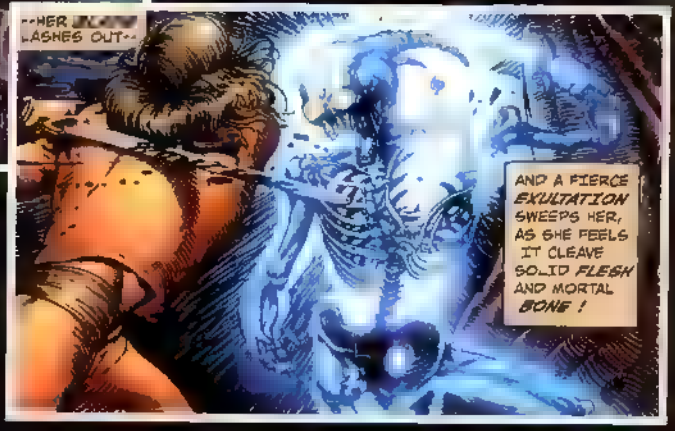
PASSAGE TO SUKHMET

One perhaps apocryphal tale even claims that Conan and Valeria met later in Sukhmet. When Red Ortho had tried to force himself on her, she had jumped ship off Kush. Upon learning that a mercenary band known as the "Free Companions" guarded the Darfar border, she joined an east-bound caravan. But their party would have become meals for the man-eating Darfari, had not Conan and company happened along.

Valeria kept the Cimmerian at arm's length, until she was forced to flee Sukmet and the two of them wound up in grim Xuchotl. While trekking back northward, they became entangled in yet another blood feud, this time between two primitive tribes. Surfeited with the jungle, they headed off to renew their lives of piracy.

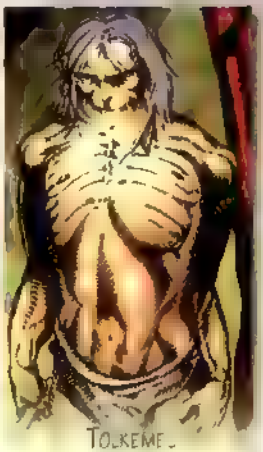
TWO IN THE IRON TOWER

One last legend tours Conan and Valeria. After winning great renown while fighting for the Aquilonians in Pictland, Conan returned to Tarantia—only to be tossed into the dreaded Iron Tower by King Numedides, who feared his new general's popularity. A trio of worthies who were opposed to Numedides' despotic rule hired a down-and-out (and quite drunk) Valeria to rescue their Cimmerian champion, which she did. Unwilling to risk her being killed, Conan knocked her out, then led their pursuers on a wild goose chase.



Red Nails

Soon Valeria and Conan reached Xuchotl, an eerie city entirely enclosed by a vast sprawling building in the midst of a great plain. There, in a strangely self-contained, claustrophobia-inducing world, they suddenly found themselves caught up in an age-old feud between two warring factions, the Tecuhltli and the Xotalanc.



TOLKEMEC

Tolkemec was a man who had been enslaved by the city's original builders years before Conan's time. Seizing the opportunity to exact revenge upon his masters, he opened the city's gates from inside, allowing Stygian warriors to invade and murder all the original inhabitants. Tolkemec disappeared and was presumed dead, although his remains were never found. In fact, it was said that his ghost still roamed the crypts below the city. When Conan, Valeria, and Tascela entered his realm, he reappeared wielding a jade-hued wand that he had found during his years in the catacombs. The only sound he made as he set about slaughtering the Xuchotlis, was a high-pitched tittering until Conan killed him once and for all.

XUCHOTL

A half century before Conan arrived in the city, a band of unsuccessful Stygian rebels had found their way to Xuchotl. The original inhabitants, an older race who had built the city as protection against dragons, had barred the newcomers from entering their domain. But Tolkemec, a prisoner, had escaped and opened the city gates from the inside. Led by the rebel brothers Tecuhltli and Xotalanc, the Stygians had slaughtered the last of the founders of Xuchotl. Five years later, the city's new masters had argued over a woman and split into two warring groups who used red nails to denote slain foes.

Such was the scene that Valeria and Conan stumbled upon. By the time they arrived, the number of nails was already beyond counting, and during their brief sojourn in Xuchotl, the war escalated in intensity, and finally

Grisly Souvenirs

When Conan and the Tecuhltli burned Yanath invaded the sanctuary of the Xotalanc, they found the heads of many a missing Tecuhltli, arranged neatly on the shelves.

A World unto Itself

To its inhabitants, the great walled and roofed palace of Xuchotl was a self-contained universe, a place where its two factions lived, killed, and died, oblivious to the events of the outside world.

Prince Olmec

The ruler of Tecuhltli pretended to befriend the two adventurers, but while Conan was away on a mission, Olmec tried to overpower and ravish Valeria. Tascela, who had her own plans for Valeria, imprisoned him in a torture device.

The Rule of Engagement

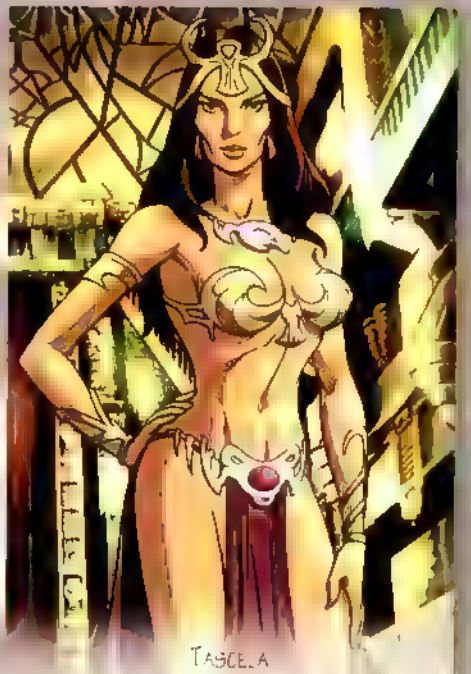
The rulers of Xuchotl had one particularly memorable and notably macabre rule: each time a warrior of either side was killed by the opposing faction, a red nail was driven into a post.

came to a head. By the time they acquitted themselves of the accursed place, they were the only living things in the city, thanks in large part to the sudden reappearance of Tolkemec. He was incredibly old, yet still vital, in a frame somehow vaguely unhuman, scaled, and reptilian.

His wand, invented by the city's founders, threw out rays of fire which slew with a sharp crackle. Conan won the day by slinging his knife into Tolkemec's evil heart. And when Valeria killed Tascela moments later, only the two interlopers stood among the dead. Conan declared the feud at an end, saying, "It's been a hell of a night. Where did these people keep their food? I'm hungry."

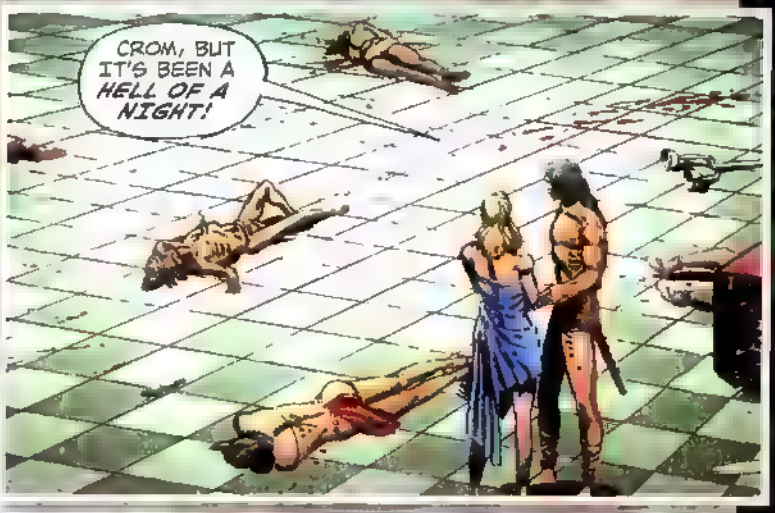
Valeria and Conan doubtless traveled together for a time, as they headed back north. They may even have become lovers. The Nemedian Chronicles offer not hint as to how or when they parted... or of the future exploits of Valeria of the Red Brotherhood.

Tolkemec's Fury
As Tolkemec slaughtered the Xuchotli, Conan saw that each burst struck only [illegible]. Armed with this knowledge [illegible] and his sword, Conan brought the slaughter to an end.



TASCELA

This princess of Xuchotl was immortal, but she needed to absorb the vital force of young women in order to remain so. According to the Nemedian Chronicles, "in her eyes alone" of all the city's dark-skinned denizens, "there lurked no brooding gleam of madness." She became obsessed with Valeria the moment she and Conan came before her and Prince Olmec. After a failed attempt to drug Valeria with the black lotus, the swordswoman chased her into the catacombs beneath the city. But Tascela was strong—stronger than most men—and she soon had Valeria bound on a sacrificial altar. As it turned out, the princess was the last of all the Xuchotli to die—stabbed from behind by Valeria as she aimed Tolkemec's deadly wand at Conan.



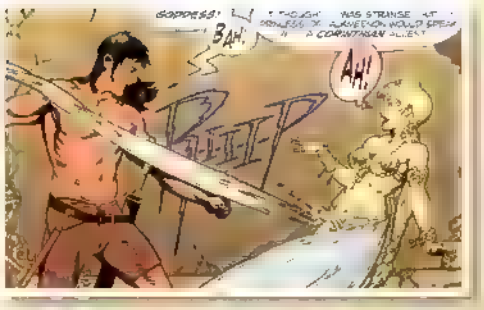
Muriela & Yelaya

Muriela wasn't exactly what Conan was looking for when he stole into the long lost, jungle-overgrown city of Askmeenon in Keshan. He was seeking the jeweled necklace called the Teeth of Gwahlur, and he expected to find only the magically preserved corpse of the city's last princess, Yelaya, in the crumbling palace. But, to his shock, the beautiful young woman suddenly rose on the ivory dais and commanded him to depart. Conan sensed that something was amiss, and he exposed her as an imposter.

No Honor Among Thieves

The young woman was actually Muriela, a dancing-girl slave who belonged to a Shemite named Zargheba. He and his partner Thutmekri had clothed her in the garments of the true Yelaya. When Keshan's priests arrived, she was to order them to give some of the Teeth of Gwahlur to Thutmekri and move the rest to the royal palace—and, oh yes, to skin Conan alive! But unbeknownst to her master, Muriela and the Cimmerian formed an alliance of convenience, with an eye toward stealing the gem-encrusted necklace for themselves.

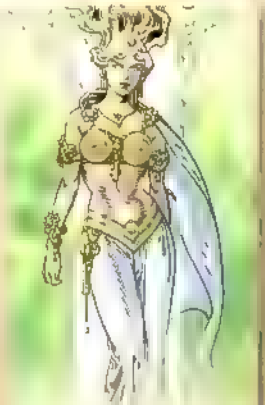
Imposter Unmasked
If she were truly a goddess of Aksmeenon, why would she speak with [illegible] accent? And where had she acquired that pearl mark on her cheek from?



The Rite to Choose

Before long, alas, the pair were attacked by the demonic Servants of Bit-Yakin, who guarded the lifesize image of Yelaya. Crossing a natural bridge high above a yawning chasm, Conan suddenly found himself forced to choose between catching one of two objects falling from above: a chest containing the Teeth of Gwahlur—or Muriela! He grabbed the girl—and the jewels vanished forever into the river below. But very soon he would be taking Muriela to nearby Punt, whose people worshipped an ivory-skinned goddess. Perhaps she would be able to get them to part with a pile of gold...

Goddess, Slave, or Slave to a Goddess?
It was Muriela's sad fate to be used by a succession of humans—first Zargheba, then Conan and later, according to legend, the goddess Nebethet.



Nebethet

The Nemedian Chronicles are silent on whether a brazen scheme by Conan and Muriela actually succeeded, but a legend with at least the ring of truth relates that they did attempt to pull it off. Muriela, pretending to be Nebethet the goddess of Punt, ordered the Puntians to give Conan their gold, and things were going smoothly until Nebethet's spirit took possession of Muriela's body! Conan tried to talk the goddess into vacating, but she refused, leaving Conan little choice but to ride off, hoping Nebethet would keep her promise to be kind to the slave girl whose human frame she now inhabited.

Another Stygian Snake
Although he killed a serpent that was attacking Conan, Thutmekri decided not to rescue him from quicksand. The first of many, just as the Stygian would back off his dealings with the Cimmerian.

Thutmekri

This Stygian adventurer had crossed Conan's path before they met in Keshan, but the Nemedian Chronicles give no details of their previous rivalry. Perhaps the story is true that says that, more than a decade earlier, the two had encountered each other in Zembabwei.

At that time, Thutmekri had impulsively killed a huge fanged serpent with which the Cimmerian was wrestling in the midst of quicksand—but then had decided to leave him to sink into the quicksand. When Conan managed to escape on his own, he bore the Stygian no love... and he had a long memory.

Better to Have Shot the Messenger...

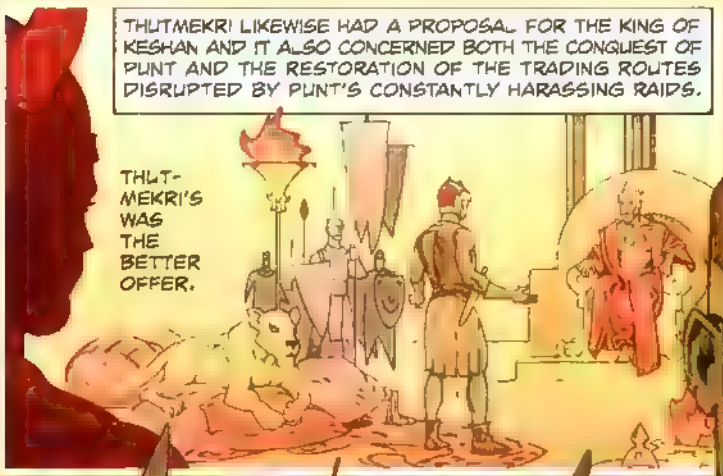
Years later, Thutmekri was appointed the leader of an envoy charged with delivering a message of high importance from Zembabwei to Keshan. Upon arrival, Thutmekri presented the the Keshan king with an offer of a military alliance against Punt and the restoration of trading routes between the two nations.

But while in Keshan, the ever-busy Thutmekri and his partner Zargheba cooked up their own scheme to relieve the country of its famed relic, the jewe.ed Teeth of Gwahlur, which resided in the abandoned city of Alkmeenon. Using Zargheba's beautiful slave, the two planned to dupe Gorulga, a Keshan priest, and his followers into giving over the treasure and killing Conan, whom Thutmekri knew was traveling to the lost city to retrieve the Teeth for himself. But the Stygian hadn't counted either on a pack of ancient demons, or the Cimmerian's uncanny knack for not dying as expected.

When Conan foiled Thutmekri's plans, legends say that the silver-tongued snake simply moved on from Keshan to Punt, where he convinced that nation's leader to ally with Zembabwei against Keshan! Conan finally brought an end to his scheming and intrigues by engaging him in personal combat—with fatal results for the Stygian. Thutmekri had crossed the Cimmerian one time too often.

The Servants of Bit-Yakin

Bit-Yakin was a wise man of the Pelishtim Shemites. Accompanied by his demonic servants, he had wandered into the deserted Keshan city of Alkmeenon centuries before Conan's time. Finding the body of Yelaya, already considered a goddess, he made of it an oracle, and for hundreds of years he made it appear as if the dead princess were speaking to the priests who came to worship there. His hairy servitors subsisted by fishing for the human corpses that Punish highlanders threw into a river that ran beneath the palace. After Bit-Yakin died, they turned even more savage, and until recently, no one had had dared come to Alkmeenon to consult the oracle. But when Keshan priests came to the lost city and brought up the precious Teeth of Gwahlur from beneath the altar, the servants of Bit-Yakin stalked like living shadows out of the temple darkness.


THUTMEKRI LIKEWISE HAD A PROPOSAL FOR THE KING OF KESHAN AND IT ALSO CONCERNED BOTH THE CONQUEST OF PUNT AND THE RESTORATION OF THE TRADING ROUTES DISRUPTED BY PUNT'S CONSTANTLY HARASSING RAIDS.
THUT-MEKRI'S WAS THE BETTER OFFER.

An Ambassador with an Agenda
Never one to put any cause before his own well-being, Thutmekri proved an unwise choice of an envoy from Zembabwei to Keshan.

CONAN

OF THE BORDER

Conan soon joined the armed forces of Aquilonia as a scout along its border with the Pictish Wilderness. Although only that vast tract of swamp and forest lay between the mightiest kingdom of the age and the Western Ocean, and although landlocked Aquilonia surely desired a seaport, that savage race remained unconquered. Indeed, in the centuries to come, it was the Picts who were destined one day to overrun the Hyborian kingdoms, not the other way around!

THROUGH A MIRROR DARKLY

With his keen intelligence, Conan must have recognized the similarities between the situations facing the Pictish Wilderness and Cimmeria, both of which were targets of imperial Aquilonia. While few records were kept of battles between civilized troops and savages in the Pictish Wilderness, legends abound of Conan's exploits there. The Nemedian Chronicles aver that the Pictish menace was increasing in size and ferocity. Fort Tuscelan offered the only protection for the Aquilonian settlers of the region known as Conajohara, which lay between the Black River and Thunder River. Despite Conan's valiant efforts, the fort was destroyed by the dusky-skinned horde. In the aftermath of that slaughter, a border man phrased it best: "Barbarism is the natural state of mankind. Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always inevitably triumph."

LEGEND OF A HERO

Events after the fall of Fort Tuscelan are very much in dispute among scholars of the Hyborian Age. One prominent legend says that Conan's heroism in attempting to warn the fortress of impending doom led to his being promoted to captain.

It goes on to describe how he led the Aquilonians to ultimate victory at a place called Massacre Meadow, where he saved a second fort, called Velitrium. For that, he was promoted to general and summoned back to Tarantia for a triumphal parade. He left the western frontier, expecting to return soon.

POLITICS AND PIRACY

According to these sources, Conan had his triumph in Aquilonia's capital. But, having aroused the envy of King Numedides, he was plied with drugged wine and chained in the Iron Tower. Yet he had friends as well as enemies in Tarantia, and he was spirited out of prison. Riding back to the frontier, he found his Bossonian troops scattered and learned that there was a price on his head. So he swam Thunder River and struck out across the dank forests of Pictland toward the distant sea.

The Chronicles pick up the tale from there, placing the Cimmerian alone in the Pictish Wilderness, where he got involved in a four-way tug-of-war over the lost treasure of the legendary pirate Tranicos. One competitor was killed by a demon, the other two by Picts, and Conan sailed away with the late nobleman's niece and her ward.

There is a variant tradition that says Conan sailed away on a ship bearing several Aquilonians, who had come north to persuade him to join their bid to overthrow King Numedides. Either way, the fact remains that the next time the Chronicles speak of Conan, he has become king of Aquilonia.

THE BORDERLANDS

THE PICTISH WILDERNESS

The coast of Pictland was well over 1,000 miles long, yet it was devoid of even a single port city. Along the Pictish coast of the Western Ocean, there existed only the rude huts and villages of the fierce Picts, who were not seamen. It is said that these coastal Picts were on an even lower cultural plane than the clans who dwelled in the forested interior.

Also known as Pictland, this "howling wilderness" was infested with poisonous serpents, stealthy panthers, ravenous wolves, and countless other dangerous creatures—not the least of which was the sabertooth cat, a tiger-size feline with fangs like great, curved swords.

The Picts themselves were short of stature, but they were every bit as fierce as the animals that stalked its forests—if not more so. Between the savage beasts and the even more savage Picts, is it any wonder that the civilized Aquilonians never conquered Pictland?

OLD SCORES
Conan once said of the Cimmerians and the Picts: "Old feuds with them as old as the world."

RIPE FOR SLAUGHTER
The Aquilonian soldier Balthus was taken prisoner by a band of Picts and bore witness as a great sabertooth feline carried off a fellow captive. He was in for an even more gruesome fate, until Conan intervened.

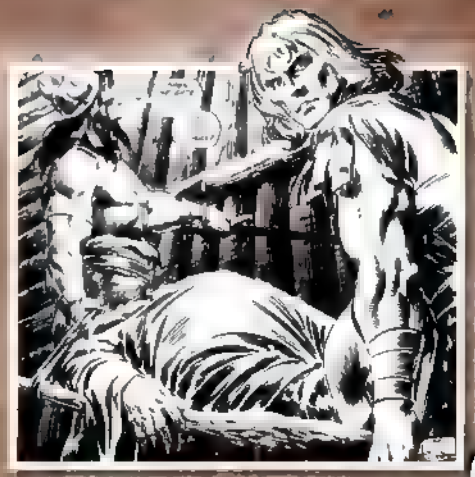
BALTHUS

A young border soldier from Tauran, a province in northwestern Aquilonia, Balthus was serving in Conajohara, a region four miles east of the Black River that has been described as a "19-mile spear thrust into the Pictish Wilderness." Conan saved his life by slaying a Pictish archer who was drawing a bead on the Aquilonian. Through such events are swift yet strong friendships forged.

Balthus had heard of his rescuer before, for the name of Conan the Cimmerian was becoming well known on the frontier. The pair had yet another connection: two decades earlier, Balthus' uncle had been one of the few to escape the slaughter at Venarium, the Aquilonian outpost in Cimmeria—while a young Conan had been "one of the horde that swarmed over the walls." But the barbarian bore no grudges against Aquilonians for that. After all, he now served the governor of Conajohara.

SAVAGE MEN, SAVAGE BEASTS

When the commander of Fort Tuscelan asked Conan to apprehend the Pictish shaman Zogar Sag, Balthus impetuously volunteered to be one of his party. Captured by the savages and bound to a post in their village, he braced himself as the huge, fanged constrictor called the Ghost Snake approached him. Conan showed up just in time to save the Aquilonian again. Together they battled their way back to Tuscelan.



A TOAST TO THE FALLEN

Conan sent Balthus with the war dog Slasher to warn the unprotected women and children of the frontier to flee back to Velitrium. When Balthus saw a group of Picts preparing to overtake the fugitives, he drew their attention by loosing arrows at them. Slasher ripped out one Pict's throat, and Balthus killed several more—but eventually both were overwhelmed by the sheer number of Picts. Later, back at Velitrium, Conan drank to the shade of Balthus, who had saved many. He vowed that the heads of ten Picts would pay for Balthus' death—and seven for the dog, "who was a better warrior than many a man!"

CIVILIZED, BUT NOT SOFT

Balthus hailed from Tauran, a province in northwest Aquilonia, whose men were made of sterner stuff than the soft-skinned denizens to the south.

SLASHER

That was the border soldiers' name for a mongrel dog whose master had been slain. They found him amid the corpses of three Picts he had killed that day. After Slasher recovered from his wounds, he turned wild, but he took a liking to Conan and, especially, Balthus.

HEADS IN A ROW

The Picts honored many of their fallen foes and captives, although many outsiders who fell into Pictish hands suffered fates far worse than death.

...AND THERE IS A CHILLY FAMILIARITY ABOUT THE FEATURES OF THE FRESHEST!
TIBERIAS!
CONAN -- WAIT! WHAT'S THAT DARK IDOL OVER THERE --SO LIKE A BEAST, YET LIKE A MAN, TOO?
HOLY MITRA! IT'S-- MOVING!

Zogar Sag

In his younger days this Pictish wizard stole an ale-carrying mule pack that belonged to a wealthy Velitrium merchant named Tiberias. Found drunk Zogar Sag was jailed, but he escaped, vowing revenge. Soon afterward, Tiberias seemingly went mad and rode out of the fort with a glassy stare. His corpse was later found by Conan and Balthus. But Zogar Sag's thirst for revenge was not slaked, and he caused his fellow Picts to launch a savage revolt against Aquilonian incursions in the Wilderness.

The Magic and the Mystery

According to the forest demon, Zogar Sag was his brother—a child birthed by a woman from Gwawela who had slept in a grove sacred to the ancient god Thebbal Sag. The wizard's magic united the Picts into into a force at least fifteen clans strong, bent on retaking Conajohara from the hated Aquilonians. He summoned both the sabertooth and the great fanged python from the wilds—and brought the terrifying forest demon, as well.

Death of a Wizard

The tale of Zogar Sag's death, as related to Conan back at Velitrium, was passing strange. Apparently during the fatal battle at Fort Tuscelan, the shaman was dancing unhurt amid the slain when he suddenly screamed and fell into the fire. No weapon had touched him, yet the teller swore there were red marks on his leg and belly, and his head had been almost severed from his body. His death took the heart out of the Picts... and they fled.

The Forest Demon

No non-Pict knew what it looked like—this demon that did the bidding of Zogar Sag. Yet the thing killed Aquilonians by luring them to their deaths. While leading the settlers toward the safety of Velitrium, Conan heard a voice calling to him from a nearby grove where he found a weird green witch-fire that shimmered with purpose. Out of the fire rose a taloned demon that looked like some huge predatory bird. But Conan had learned over the years that any being clothed in material flesh could be slain by material weapons. So he brought it down with his slicing sword that cut crimson wounds on its legs and belly, and nearly severed its head. Only when he heard how Zogar Sag had died miles away did Conan sense the truth of the connection between shaman and demon.

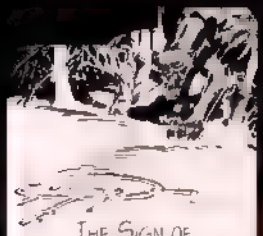
Sagayetha

The shaman is dead—long live the shaman! In legends that fill the gaps between Conajohara's fall and the death of Zogar Sag, there are tales of the shaman Sagayetha. He was the nephew of Zogar Sag and when his uncle was killed, he became the Picts' new wizard.

What was shall be again

Once, long ago, when beasts and men spoke one language, all living things worshipped Jhebbal Sag. By Conan's time, most men had forgotten him... as had most of the animals. But those men and animals who did remember were brothers and spoke the same tongue. Those were the men and beasts that Zogar Sag and his nephew Sagayetha, both of whom might have been descendants of the god, could command.

Among them were the deadly vipers that Sagayetha sent against the frontier soldiers. He also worked in concert with an Aquilonian traitor to destroy Velitrium. After dealing with the betrayer, Conan—now a captain—stole into the Picts' camp and beheaded Sagayetha. Seeing the shaman's head on a pike as the Cimmerian galloped toward them on Massacre Meadow, the Picts scattered—and Conan was soon promoted to general.



The Sign of Jhebbal Sag

Conan first saw the sign of Jhebbal Sag in a cave in the uninhabited mountains beyond the Vilayet Sea. Some time later, he had watched as a witch finder of Kush scratched it in the sand on the banks of a nameless river. The man had told him it was sacred to Jhebbal Sag and to the creatures that still worshipped it. While on the way back to Fort Tuscelan, Conan carved the image in the dirt with his sword, then he and Balthus watched from hiding as a black panther slinked from the jungle studied the sign and fled as if in sudden panic. From that time forward, Conan told Balthus, they had no more to fear from beasts of Pict

Like Uncle, Like Nephew?

If Conan thought his battles with [illegible] beasts died with Zogar Sag, he was in for a rude surprise when his nephew Sagayetha took power

TRANICOS' TREASURE

A century before Conan's day, the celebrated corsair Tranicos had stormed the island castle of the exiled Stygian prince Tothmekri, killed him, and borne off his gold. Fearing betrayal, Tranicos had sailed northward toward the hostile coasts of Pictland and Vanaheim, to vanish forever from the sight of men.

As Conan would see for himself 100 years later, the corpses of Tranicos and his 11 trusted captains still sat around a table in a cave in the Pictish forest, their bodies tragically preserved—but the famous treasure was not in sight.

TREASURE HUNT

Seeking the very same treasure, the notorious Barachan pirate Strombanni had barely arrived on the Pictish shore when he had to flee from a ship flying the royal flag of Zingara. He soon learned that the vessel actually belonged to his old rival, the buccaneer Black Zarono—and the two pirates formed an uneasy alliance with the greedy Count Valenso to find the gold.

Of course, each of the three men meant to betray the others, if and when the plunder was found. And when Conan turned up, he carved himself a quarter of the pirates' pie.

DEAD MEN'S CHEST

In the end, it was all a waste of time and lives. Eager to rid their lands of intruders, bloodthirsty Picts overran Valenso's fort. The ensuing battle put an end to the four-way pact and the search for Tranicos' fabled riches. Zarono died first, his skull split open by a savage's battle-axe. Moments later, Strombanni perished as well, knifed from behind by a Pict whose skull he split before he expired.

THE EVER-ELUSIVE FORTUNE

Conan never found the fabled treasure, but he did manage to scoop up a few "trinkets" from a casket.

WATCH YOUR BACK

The three-way pirate alliance ended in bloodshed, but then, few pirate's ever ended their lives between silken sheets or four-poster beds.

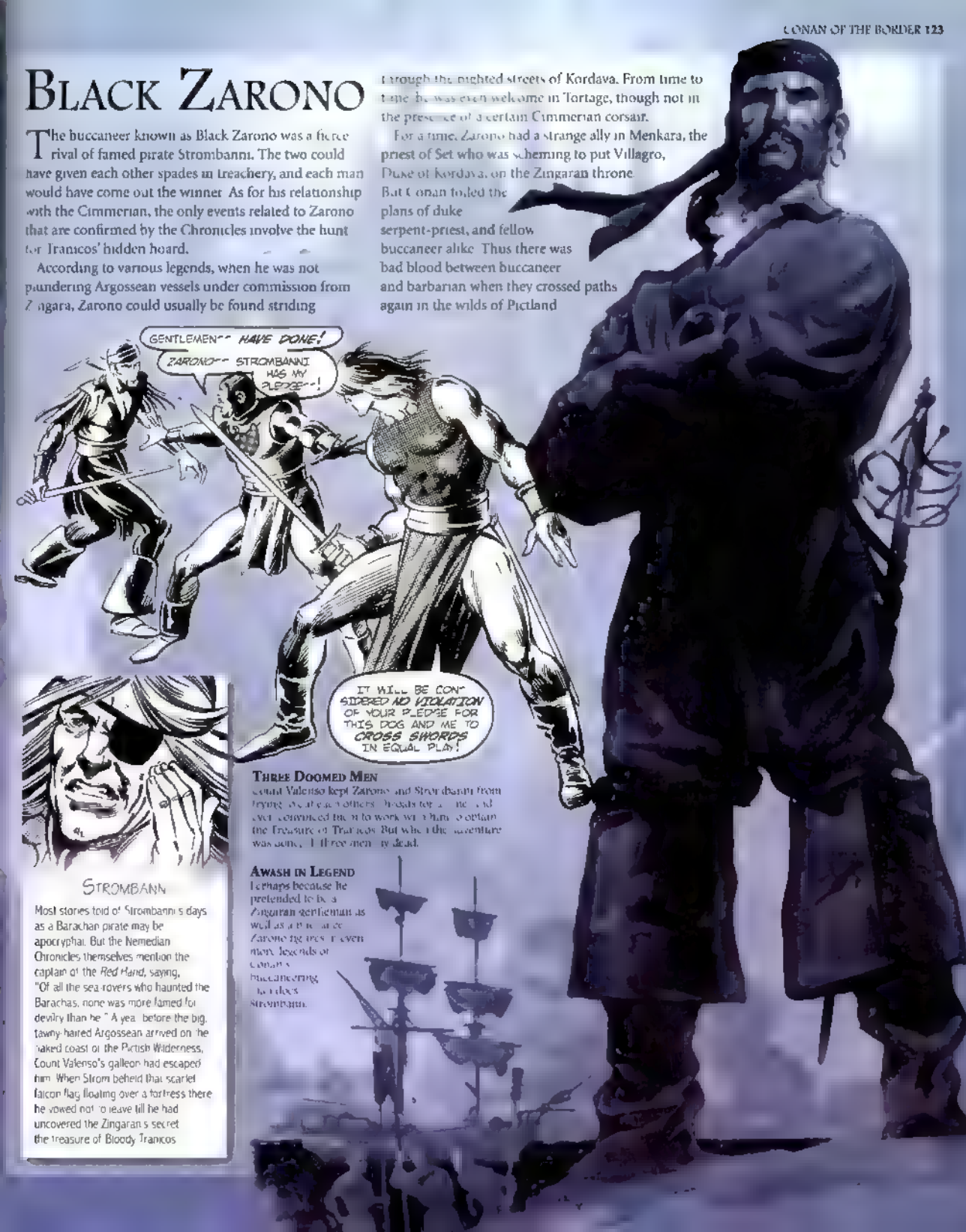
THE PICTISH WILDERNESS!-- VAST, SHADOWED, ALMOST IMPENETRABLE IN ITS VERDANT, PRIMITIVE SPLENDOR.
A MERE THIRTY YARDS AGO, THIS PARTY OF GRIM CORSAIRS LEFT THE SUN-SPLASHED BEACH: CONAN, THE CIMMERIAN-- THE ZINGARAN BUCCANEER BLACK ZARONO-- THE BARACHAN PIRATE STROMBANNI-- AND SOME THIRTY MEN, CULLED EQUALLY FROM THE BLOODTHIRSTY CREWS OF THE LATTER TWO CAPTAINS.
NOW, THOUGH THEY FOLLOW AN OLD PATH MADE BY PICTISH HUNTERS WHICH LEADS DUE EAST, THE BEACH IS NO LONGER VISIBLE...

Black Zarono

The buccaneer known as Black Zarono was a fierce rival of famed pirate Strombanni. The two could have given each other spades in treachery, and each man would have come out the winner. As for his relationship with the Cimmerian, the only events related to Zarono that are confirmed by the Chronicles involve the hunt for Tranicos' hidden hoard.

According to various legends, when he was not pandering Argossean vessels under commission from Zingara, Zarono could usually be found striding through the blighted streets of Kordava. From time to time, he was even welcome in Tortage, though not in the presence of a certain Cimmerian corsair.

For a time, Zarono had a strange ally in Menkara, the priest of Set who was scheming to put Villagro, Duke of Kordava, on the Zingaran throne. But Conan foiled the plans of duke, serpent-priest, and fellow buccaneer alike. Thus there was bad blood between buccaneer and barbarian when they crossed paths again in the wilds of Pictland.


GENTLEMEN-- HAVE DONE!
ZARONO-- STROMBANNI HAS MY PLEDGE--!
IT WILL BE CONSIDERED NO VIOLATION OF YOUR PLEDGE FOR THIS DOG AND ME TO CROSS SWORDS IN EQUAL PLAY!

Three Doomed Men

Count Valenso kept Zarono and Strombanni from trying to kill each other. Instead, he and the two convinced them to work with him to obtain the treasure of Tranicos. But when the adventure was done, all three men lay dead.

Awash in Legend

Perhaps because he pretended to be a Zingaran gentleman as well as a buccaneer, Zarono figures in even more legends of Conan's buccaneering days than does Strombanni.

Strombanni

Most stories told of Strombanni's days as a Barachan pirate may be apocryphal. But the Nemedian Chronicles themselves mention the captain of the *Red Hand*, saying, "Of all the sea-rovers who haunted the Barachas, none was more famed for deviltry than he." A year before the big, tawny-haired Argossean arrived on the naked coast of the Pictish Wilderness, Count Valenso's galleon had escaped him. When Strom beheld that scarlet falcon flag floating over a fortress there he vowed not to leave till he had uncovered the Zingaran's secret, the treasure of Bloody Tranicos.

THE BLACK STRANGER

When Count Valenso fled Zingara with his niece, he was not searching for the Treasure of Tranicos, as Zarono and Strombanni believed. Rather, he was fleeing a demon loosed in his youth by his own greed, which had caused a storm at sea that had wrecked Valenso's ship on the Pictish coast. More than once, it invaded Valenso's castle to terrify him before the final reckoning. The "black one" hung Valenso from his own roofbeam, even as the Picts were storming his fortress. Conan knew of its vulnerabilities, so he hurled a 100-pound silver bench at the thing that confronted him—knocking it backward into the flames of the burning fortress.

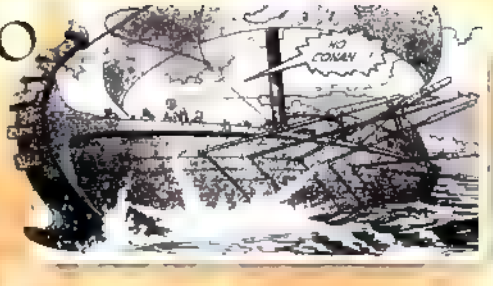
DEMON—OR MAGE?

The Nemedian Chronicles are clear on the nature of the "black stranger," but there exists another version of the episode in which the fiend was no minor demon but the very real Thoth-amon of the Ring, but the version in the Chronicles must be considered the authentic one.

THE PRICE OF GREED
Although often appearing as a human, the demon unleashed by Valenso was in fact a "fiend from the outer gulfs of existence," "an unearthly thing" upon which Conan imposed an "earthly death."

Count Trocero

Poitain had at one point been an independent kingdom, but in Conan's time it was a loyal province of Aquilonia, and Count Trocero was its ruler. He figures prominently in apocryphal tellings of the tale of the Treasure of Tranicos, and in several other perhaps-mythical episodes. But he is also a very real figure in the Nemedian Chronicles—a lithe restless man with a narrow waist and the shoulders of a swordsman.



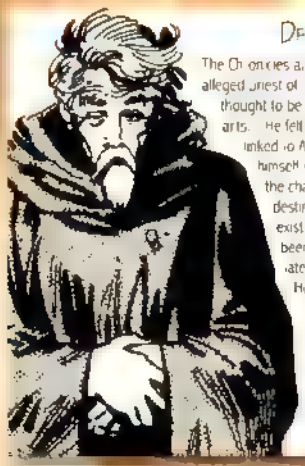
In Search of a King?
According to one legend, Trocero, Prospero, Dexitheus, and the Count once sailed north to find the Cimmerian, arriving just after the Picts burned Count Valenso's fortress.

Prospero

Prospero was a Poitainian nobleman, a general of armies, and another of King Conan's most loyal supporters. When the poet Rinaldo sang songs that mocked his liege lord as an usurper Prospero felt he should be hanged, saying, "Let him make his rimes for the vultures." He was known for carelessly whistling tunes to himself in the presence of the Cimmerian. In legend, Prospero joined the search for Conan in Pictland before he was king.

Dexitheus

The Chronicles are silent about this alleged priest of the god Mitra, who was thought to be a practitioner of "occult arts." He felt that Conan's fate was linked to Aquilonia's, and that he himself was but one small link in the chain of the Cimmerian's destiny. If Dexitheus did not exist, it would indeed have been necessary for some later scribe to invent him. How else but by magic could a handful of Aquilonians on a single galley ever have located Conan in the middle of the Pictish Wilderness?



A Youthful Bent
Although not nearly as powerful by far as the Cimmerian, Count Trocero was known as a man who carried his years lightly—but he was not a man to be taken lightly himself.

King Maker

Many years later, when Conan became king of Aquilonia, Count Trocero proved himself one of the Cimmerian's most loyal and trusted subjects. Due to their strong bond, stories have emerged in which Trocero plays a part in putting Conan on the throne.

The Chronicles themselves record that Conan once remarked that he had seized the throne of Aquilonia "with the aid of its subjects"—of whom Trocero was one of the most prominent. Although scholars hold differing opinions on the part that Trocero may or may not have played in Conan's usurpation of the crown of Aquilonia, the true extent of the Count's involvement in Conan's ascension to kingship, if any, will most likely never be known.

CONAN

THE LIBERATOR

In the days of revolt, Conan was hailed as "the Liberator." He said that when the tyrant King Numedides lay dead at his feet, he "tore the crown from his gory head and set it on my own." But he still had much to learn, saying later, "I had prepared myself to take the crown, not to hold it." Yet, take the crown he did.

A PIRATE COMES SOUTH

Once more, legend steps forward to shine a light where facts are shadowy. According to one tale, after the events surrounding the search for Thanicos' treasure, the Cimmerian came south by ship from Pictland to Argos, since Aquilonia itself was landlocked. He was accompanied by Count Trocero of Poitain, the nobleman general Prospero, Dexitheus, priest of Mitra, and the councilor Publius. If this legend is true, it is fitting that he arrived in Aquilonia still wearing pirate garb he had acquired in the north—for he meant to plunder the crown of Aquilonia.

A GATHERING OF EAGLES

According to this tradition, Conan returned to the Hyborian lands already determined to unseat Numedides. He and his allies soon had an army of more than 10,000 men, many of them veterans who had served with Conan in the Lion Regiment at Velitrium and Massacre Meadow during the Pictish wars. Naturally, King Milo of Argos was eager to see this multitude leave his soil. Why risk angering his more powerful fellow monarch to the north? And why give Conan the idea that being king of Argos might be enough?

SWORDS ACROSS THE ALIMANE

The legend cycle says that Numedides' "advisor" Thulandra Thuu used sorcery against Conan's forces as they marched toward Tarantia. In addition, the Cimmerian did not realize that he had a traitor in his midst, betraying his every move. Ambushed as they attempted to cross the Alimane River, his forces were scattered across the countryside. But the men regrouped, and with the aid of the strange satyr-folk who inhabited the hills of Poitain, the rebel army gained a victory over Aquilonian forces personally led by Thulandra Thuu. But the real test was yet to come, as the army moved toward the capital.

DEATH OF A MAD KING

At last, Conan faced Numedides in the palace royal. Thulandra Thuu vanished by magic, and Numedides soon lay dead, despite Conan's attempt to show him mercy. The new king named Dexitheus his chancellor, in recognition of good advice and service rendered during the rebellion. Ere long, his old councilor Publius was besieging him with treasury accounts, petitions, and advocates' briefs. Conan saw that responsibilities, as well as power, came with the crown.

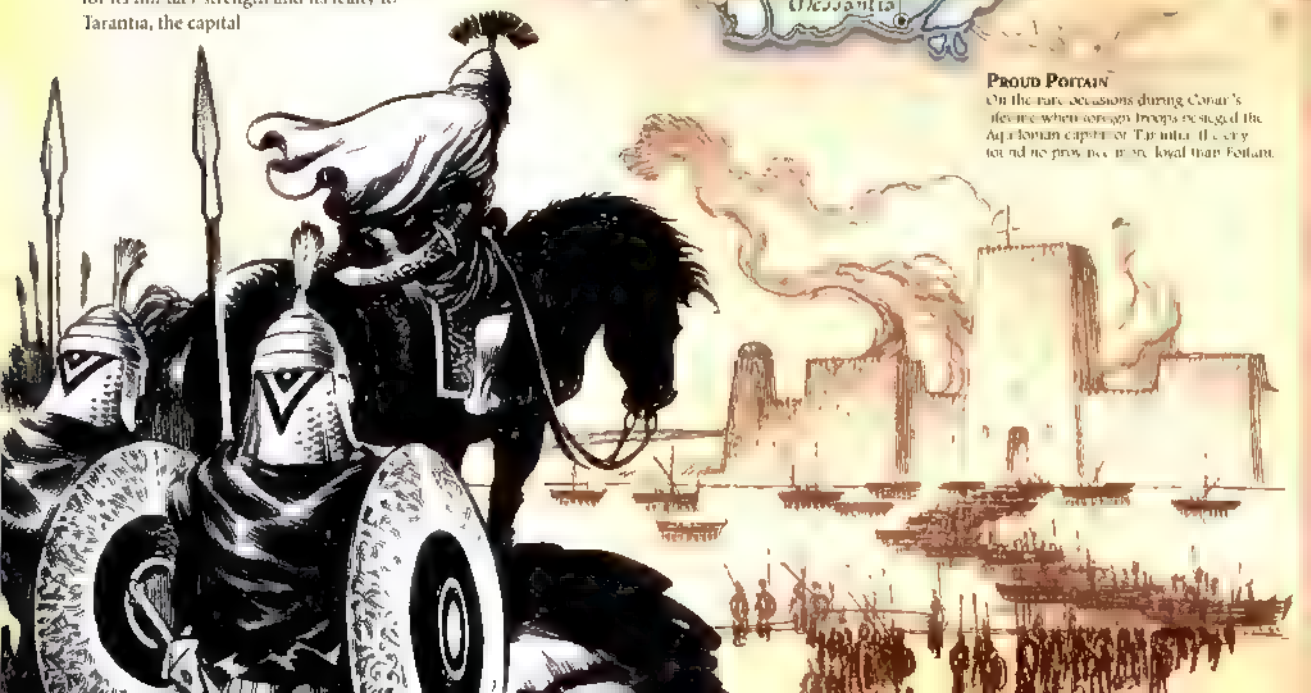
"...to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth..."

BARBARIANS AT THE GATE

AQUILONIAN FRONTIER

The central portion of Aquilonia was shielded from attack by several "buffer" provinces. The thinly settled region known as Westermarck lay between the Black River and the Thunder River, separating Aquilonia from the Pictish Wilderness. Schohira, Oriskonie, Conawaga, and Conajohara—before it fell to the Picts—were each controlled by a baron who owed a tenuous allegiance to the king. Bossonia, also known as the Bossonian Marches, likewise resisted all but rule by the central government. The hills of Gunderland provided troops to Tarantia, but its people "never considered themselves exactly Aquilonians."

Poitain, Aquilonia's southernmost region, had not always been a part of the great kingdom. But in Conan's day, it was ruled by Count Trocero and was renowned for its military strength and its fealty to Tarantia, the capital.



PROUD POITAIN
On the rare occasions during Conan's reign when foreign troops besieged the Aquilonian capital of Tarantia, the city found no group more loyal than Poitain.

GAULT, HAGAR'S SON

The Hyborian Age gave rise to many stirring events, not all of which featured the deeds of Conan. The Nemedian Chronicles record that while the revolt raged on the Aquilonian plain, civil war flared up along the Pictish frontier between the partisans of Conan and those of Numedides. The Picts saw this as their opportunity to push the hated Hyborians entirely out of the Westermarck, the region that lay between the Black and Thunder rivers. Gault, son of Hagar, sneaked beyond that border to spy for the forces loyal to Conan.

WIZARDRY WEST OF THE WESTERMARCK

From hiding, Gault beheld a tribal ceremony presided over by Teyanoga, the old Pictish shaman who had burned alive a friend of Gault's. Hagar's son gleaned that the Hawk, Turtle and Wildcat tribes were uniting to cut the throats of all Aquilonians. Just before he fled for his life, Gault saw there was a Hyborian among the Picts. . a man as painted and near naked as they!

A TRAITOR IN SCHOHIRA

In a fort in the Westermarck province of Schohira, Gault saw again the white man he had spied among the Picts and exposed him. He was Valerian, a landed lord who was a secret ally of Numedides. He had plotted to betray Schohira, which supported Conan, to the Picts. Valerian was locked up, but he escaped. Hakon, the fort's commander, took Gault and a dozen men and followed the traitor. In skirmishes with the Picts, all were slain except Gault and Hakon.

GHASTLY DOINGS IN GHOST SWAMP

The two men trailed the turncoat lord across the border to a camp near Ghost Swamp, where the Pict chiefs had gone to seek council from an ancient shaman. Paid off by Valerian, the corrupt wizard gave them a ghastly magic to use against the Hyborians. Springing to action, Gault and Hakon slew both the shaman and Valerian. They even found a way to turn the shaman's magic against the Picts, so that they were routed and Teyanoga was slain.

HORRORS OF THE GHOST SWAMP
Monsters as well as men served the ambitious Pictish shamans. Bold warriors like Gault often seemed to have eyes in the back of their heads, and they used their axes accordingly.

BETTER LEFT UNSEEN
While surveying the Hawk's clan, Gault beheld an unholy rite in which an ancient shaman exchanged the souls of a man and a serpent.

A PICTISH WARDRUM, IN THE HANDS OF THOSE WILD, PAINTED SAVAGES WHO HAUNT THE WILDERNESS BEYOND THE BORDER OF THE WESTERMARCK!

KING NUMEDIDES

Numedides is little more than a name in the Nemedian Chronicles, a despot who lost his life and his crown to Conan. But legend has fleshed Numedides out—literally.

NUMEDIDES THE GOD

In these perhaps apocryphal tales, he was a weak minded tyrant who, having fallen under the thumb of the wizard Thulandra Thuu, took to bathing in the blood of virgins, holding conversations with trees and flowers, and ordering the golden coinage in his treasury recast into statues of himself. He became convinced that he was a deity who lacked only immortality. Woe to a kingdom, when madness wears the crown!

DELUSIONS OF ADEQUACY

Although teetering on the brink of madness, he began to recognize the depth of his self-delusion when he tried to molest the woman Alcina, who served Thulandra Thuu. The wizard ordered him to stop his advances, whereupon the king threatened to blast him with lightning. He then attacked the mage with the Sword of State—only to have his weapon parried with a mere wooden staff and sent flying back at him, slicing his ear. After the incident, he persisted in his attempts to order the wizard around, albeit more warily.

DEATH OF A DESPOT

And then—suddenly—Conan was there, backed by Dexitheus and a handful of soldiers. Deserted by Thulandra Thuu, Numedides begged for mercy, saying that Conan could not possibly kill an unarmed man. The Cimmerian would have been content merely to have him bound and gagged until they could find a madhouse for him. But when he tried to stab the barbarian from behind with a poisoned dagger, Conan saw that he would never be safe while Numedides was alive. So Conan strangled the king with his bare hands—and placed the crown upon his own head.

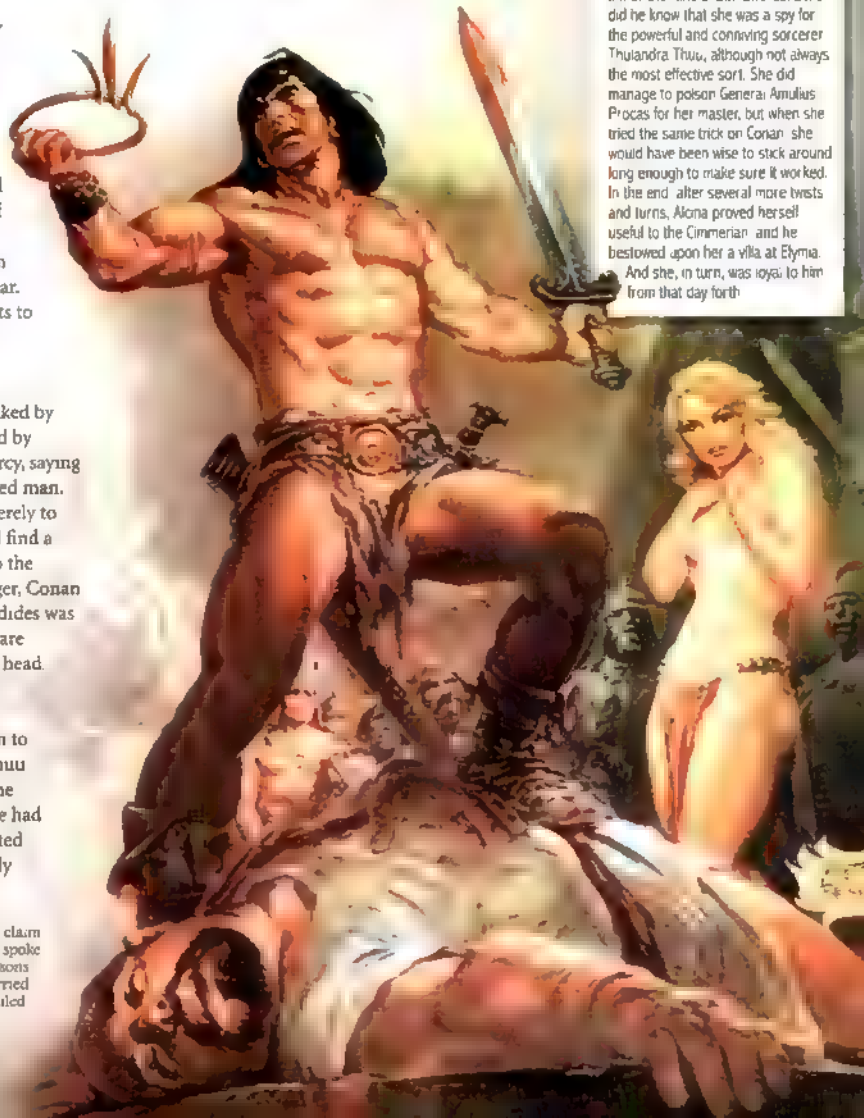
A LOOSE END

When Conan had burst into the throne room to face Numedides and his mage, Thulandra Thuu had fled, leaving his beautiful spy Alcina alone and cowering in fear. Facing the man that she had spied on, betrayed, and very nearly assassinated with poison, she knelt before him and blithely lied that she had been "ensorcelled"—forced to do the wizard's bidding. Conan spared her life because she was a woman, but said that if she were ever again found in Aquilonia, she would lose her pretty head.

REDEMPTION

Alcina never actually left the realm. One day, not long afterward, she had her chance for revenge when Conan crawled out of a river, half drowned by the wizard's treachery. Gasping for air, he vowed to forget her betrayal if she helped him. She hesitated—then stabbed the Thulandra Thuu's Khitan servant before he could kill Conan. The king kept his word. After he beheaded Thulandra Thuu, he rewarded her richly.

The spy wore... very little. In the legend of Conan the Liberator, Alcina looms large. The Cimmerian rebel was intrigued by the dark-haired dancing girl he beheld in Messantia's Inn of the Nine Drawn Swords. Little did he know that she was a spy for the powerful and conniving sorcerer Thulandra Thuu, although not always the most effective sort. She did manage to poison General Amulius Procas for her master, but when she tried the same trick on Conan she would have been wise to stick around long enough to make sure it worked. In the end, after several more twists and turns, Alcina proved herself useful to the Cimmerian, and he bestowed upon her a villa at Elymia. And she, in turn, was loyal to him from that day forth.



LIBERATOR OR USURPER?

Tradition holds that Numedides was a tyrant, but that claim relies mostly upon Conan's own words. One night, he spoke to Prospero of men maimed by Numedides' goons, of sons who died in his dungeons, of wives and daughters carried off into his seraglio. If true, no wonder Conan was hailed as a liberator when he struck for the throne.

THULANDRA THUU

In the tales that were woven about Conan's bid for power, Thulandra Thuu is the supreme mystery, an eldritch enigma. Some whispered that this foreigner who had become King Numedides' chief advisor was a Witchman from mist-veiled Hyperborea; others said that he hailed from Stygia, Shem, or distant Vendhya. Some called him a philosopher or an alchemist, and some even used his correct title of sorcerer. A few mistakenly thought that he was a mere charlatan.

But anyone could see that Thulandra Thuu, not Numedides, ruled from the Ruby Throne. Even the king's chancellor took orders from Thulandra as if they were issued from the king himself. As Aquilonia was learning, the only thing worse than having a madman for a king was having an unscrupulous magician controlling him.

Thulandra was seeking the secret of eternal life—but for his own use, not the king's. Meanwhile, he was forced to take action against the rebel Conan, who was leading a growing army north from Argos by way of Poitain. The mage sent Alcina, a dancing girl, to spy on Conan, outfitting her with an obsidian talisman that would allow him to see all that occurred between them. Fortunately, he did not blush easily.

WHEN TURNS THE TIDE

But Thulandra Thuu made several costly mistakes, not the least of which was underestimating the resiliance of the Cimmerian. Conan's stamina, along with Dexitheus' herbs, allowed him to recover from Alcina's poison, and Thulandra compounded this error by sending Alcina to assassinate Amulius Procas, foremost of the realm's generals. When Conan made an unexpected return, Tarantia's army found itself without its ablest general.

But Thulandra was not beaten yet. He conjured storms that delayed Conan's progress, and utilizing a ritual that required the blood sacrifice of a captive satyr, he sent avalanches hurtling down on Conan's men. But when his own spy's magic talisman fell into Conan's hands and the satyrs came to his aid, the tide turned. Now, at last, the road to Tarantia was open, the final confrontation with both Numedides and Thulandra Thuu was approaching, and even the Black Dragons, the king's elite guard, had come over to Conan's side!

A SHORT, UNHAPPY REIGN

When Conan stormed the palace, Thulandra vanished, saying he was going to a land beyond the sunrise. In truth, he hid himself in a nearby forest, where he made one final attempt on the Cimmerian's life. He assaulted the king on his royal hunt and, assuming him dead, the sorcerer magically disguised himself and took Conan's place on the throne. That mistake would be his last.

A RECKONING... DELAYED

When Conan and his men invaded the palace itself, Thulandra Thuu found that the Mitran priest Dexitheus had learned spells that countered many of his own. The result was a standoff.

GOLA

Gola was one of a tribe of Poitainian forest satyrs that suffered horribly at Thulandra Thuu's hands. Prospero freed him and several of his kind from enemy soldiers, and later, when he needed help, Conan was told that he and his men should stop up their ears. Suddenly a shrill, unearthly piping panicked the enemy soldiers, and the rebels carried the day. One can safely wager there was no satyr-hunting in Poitain's woodlands during Conan's reign.

CONAN

THE KING

As a pair of scholars once wrote, Conan soon learned that being ruler of a mighty kingdom like Aquilonia "was no bed of houris." His crown rested most uneasily on his black maned head—and how could it not have done so? To many, he was not "the Liberator," but "the Usurper."

The first major threat to his reign came perhaps a year after he seized power, when plotters attempted to put a native-born king on the throne. Not long afterward, the kings of Ophir and Koth conspired to try to bring down Conan, and they even succeeded in capturing him. Both schemes were foiled as much by sorcerers—in fact, by a total of three sorcerers—as by the redoubtable Cimmerian's own efforts. Conan had always disliked wizardry, but over the years he had gradually lost most of his fear of it, and in his middle years he had few qualms about accepting magical help when it was offered.

THE HAUNTER OF THE RING

Legends sprouted up around Conan the king as profusely as ever they had about the barbarian, the pirate, or the soldier of fortune. For instance, soon after the first assassination plot was foiled—thanks in part to the inadvertent aid of Thoth-Amon—it's said that Conan's friend Trocero ran into some marital problems. He was tormented by the fact that his wife Evlena had tried to kill him—not that she recalled doing so. When Conan learned that a rejected suitor had given her a ring that had once belonged to Thoth, Conan finessed the ring onto the plotter's finger. When a demon came for Evlena, it carried him off instead.

A MATTER OF LINEAGE

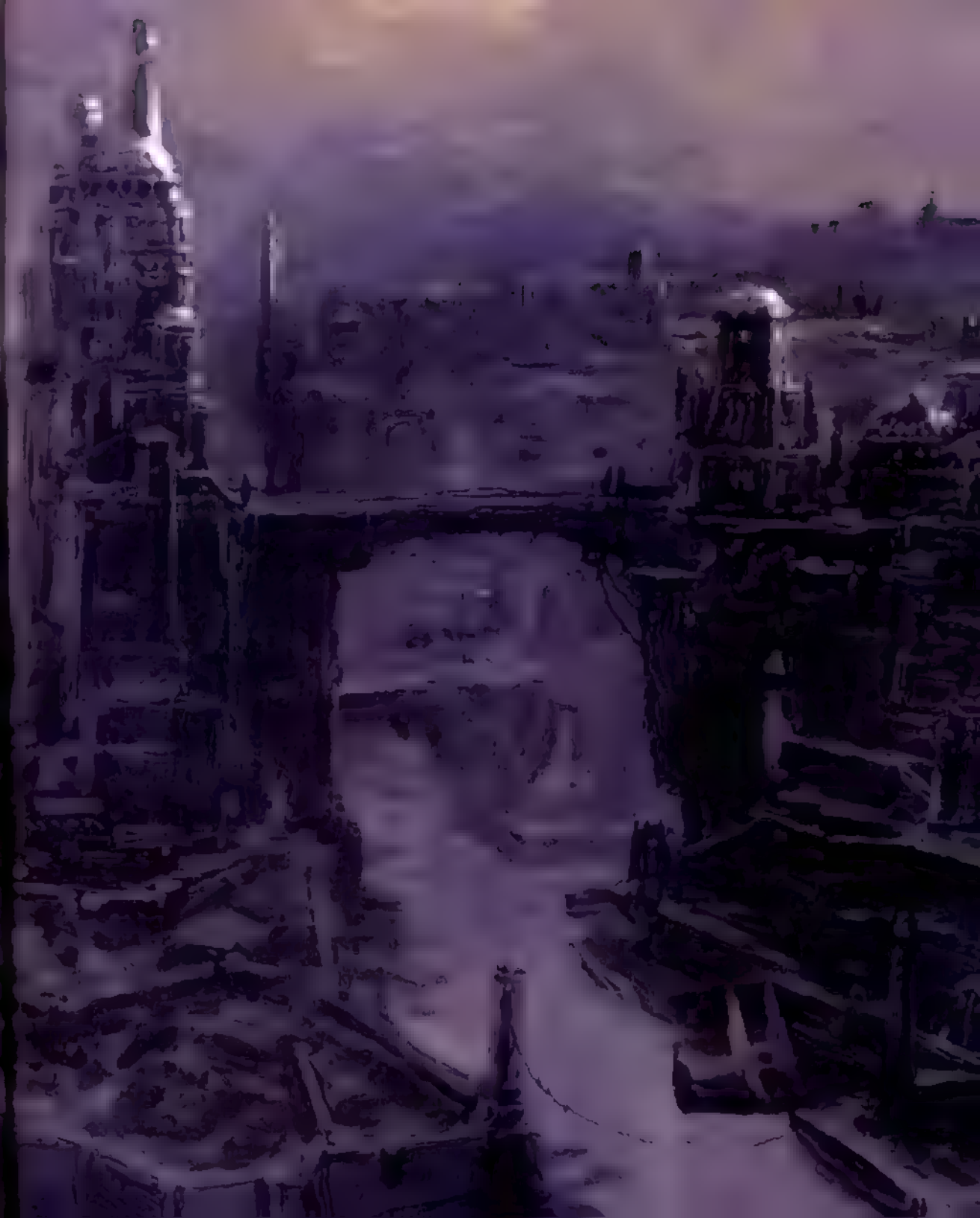
About five years into his reign, Conan was unseated and imprisoned a second time, by a second group of plotters. He had left himself vulnerable to such schemes by never marrying or producing an heir during his half decade rule. Therefore his reign lacked a feeling of permanence, the sense that a dynasty was beginning. This time it took longer for Conan to re-establish his rule, but he did so—once again with some timely help from sorcery. Having regained his throne, he announced that he would wed the young woman who had helped him escape.

At precisely this point, the Nemedian Chronicles break off, with the victorious barbarian king still standing among the blood of the battlefield. After Conan became king once more, there is not a single fact known for certain about his life—not even whether he actually carried out his marriage intentions, let alone whether said queen produced an heir to give legitimacy to his reign. There are only legends.

THE PERSISTENCE OF LEGEND

And yet, those tales exist in abundance. Legends of Conan's return to Nemedia to collect his bride-to-be—the wedding night... the abduction of his queen and his single-handed pursuit of her across half a world... his children, especially a firstborn son called Conn—the deaths of some of his greatest surviving enemies.

In short, these legends seem to show that Conan's life as king was no less eventful than his rise to kingship had been.



The Age of King Conan

POITAIN
In Conan's day this southernmost province of Aquilonia was considered its strongest and most loyal—thus, natural soldier-copiers

AQUILONIA

The Nemedian Chronicles say that "the proudest kingdom of the world was Aquilonia, reigning supreme in the dreaming west." Small wonder it became, by fate or design, the ultimate destination of Conan the Cimmerian. If, in a later era, all roads led to Rome, then in the Hyborian Age, the same could certainly be said of Tarantia, which was located at the very midpoint of the Road of Kings. No matter their destination or direction, travelers were likely to pass through Aquilonia or sail upon its major rivers, the Khorotas, the Shirki, and the Valka. The kingdom, which contained much fertile cropland and forest, was divided into provinces, although its overall emblem was that of a roaring Lion. The kings and nobles of Aquilonia seem to have learned over the years the value of allowing regional states a certain degree of sovereignty in exchange for loyalty to the throne. And, apparently, it worked, as the Chronicles make no mention of all-out civil war during the period.

King Conan's Castle

When the Cimmerian slew King Numedides and placed the latter's bloody crown on his own black maned head, he had risen as high as any man could ever have dreamed. Now this bronzed barbarian ruled the most powerful land of the era. But there were intrigues afoot and uneasy lay any head—not only Numedides' that wore the crown. Conan's castle in Tarantia was a vast sprawling stronghold—vast enough to house a myriad of dagger-handed conspiracies!

OPHIR

The borders of Ophir were secure—except perhaps for those shared with Koth. Relations between the two kingdoms were strained, although they did eventually make common cause against King Conan and even prevailed against the Aquilonian host—briefly. A few generations later, it was overwhelmed and absorbed by the growing Pictish empire.

KOTH

After its fleeting victory against Aquilonia, Koth fared no better than Ophir. Often plagued by civil war, it would soon bend the knee to Aquilonia. Later it became a battleground over which hordes of Picts and empire-thirsting Turanians fought war after war.

KHITAI

There is no evidence in the Nemedian Chronicles that Conan ever even thought of Khitai. Legends have him traveling as far as its satellite kingdom Kusan—either before or after he was king in Aquilonia. Yet who is to say how many stories, rising out of the mists of the East, may have a basis in fact? Perhaps only the magical mirrors of Tuzun Thune could reveal the truth.

VENGEANCE OF A KING
Conan's reign was briefly interrupted when Zenobia, his queen, was kidnapped by Khitan sorcerers. Alone, he made his way [illegible] and found his queen on the brink of a grisly death. Needless to say, the kidnappers would rue the day they interfered with Conan's marriage.

KARA KORUM
Desert of Black Sand

Wan Tengri

Shu Chen

LEMURIA

Shaulun

Paikang

Ruo Gen

KHITAI

GREAT WALL OF KHITAI

MOUNTAINS OF NIGHT

KAMBUJA

MORE MAN-EATING MONKEYS
If legends are true, Conan's travels eastward brought him in contact with many strange creatures... and with more than one species of carnivorous ape.

PALLANTIDES

Pallantides was one of the foremost of Aquilonia's generals and the commander of the legendary Black Dragons, the king's personal troops. The tales are probably true that say he brought the crack unit over to Conan's side during the revolt against Numedides. Although completely loyal to King Conan, he confessed five years after the revolt that his sovereign remained something of "an enigma." Still, he respected the fact that Conan had been many things before a twist of fate had set him on the throne of Aquilonia. And Pallantides was a great respecter of fate.

"AH, THE PROUD, VAIN REBEL FOUR:
"DION, WHO THINKS THE CROWN OF AQUILONIA WILL BE HIS WHEN THE BARBARIAN USURPER IS CAST DOWN...
"GROMEL, WHO DESIRES TO COMMAND THE PRESTIGIOUS BLACK DRAGON REGIMENT...
"DWARFISH VOLMANA WHO SEEKS POWER AND POSITION
"OF THE REBEL FOUR, ONLY THE POET RINALDO HAS NO PERSONAL AMBITION.
"THE FOUR OF THEM AND I HAVE PLOTTED WELL, THESE PAST WEEKS.

FOR MADE BOLD BY LIQUOR I'VE SMUGGLED OVER THE BORDER, THE HEATHEN PICTS ASSAIL THE WESTERN BOUNDARIES OF THESE HYBORIAN LANDS..
AND IT WAS EASY FOR VOLMANA TO PERSUADE KING NUMA OF NEMEDIA TO REQUEST AID FROM AQUILONIA TO SMASH THEM
BOTH COUNT TROCERO AND PROSPERO, KING CONAN'S RIGHT-HAND MAN, HAVE ALREADY LEFT FOR THE FRONTIER.

The Plotters

In the first year of King Conan's reign, five men plotted to bring down this barbarian usurper—and they very nearly succeeded.

COUNT ASCALANTE

Exiled for earlier sins, Ascalante, Count of Thune, had resigned himself to raiding caravans for the rest of his life. But when four plotters and smuggled him back into the kingdom, old ambitions stirred. He snuck liquor over the border into Pictland, hoping that the savages would draw troops out of Tarantia. Then the stage would be set for the city to fall to him once he and 16 "desperate rogues" killed Conan. And it might have worked, but for his sullen, dusky slave... the somber, gaunt giant called Thoth-amon.

DION

Perhaps Ascalante was right in saying that Conan should have executed all men who retained a trace of royal blood—such as Dion, the fat baron of Attalus. Dion, who financed much of the plot, planned to take the throne on Conan's death—but the Count of Thune intended that he, too, would soon die. Ironically, it was Dion who brought the whole scheme crashing down. Through his folly, Thoth-amon reclaimed possession of his pilfered magic ring. With Dion dead at his feet, he unleashed an unholy terror upon nighted Tarantia.

Ascalante and the Four
Ascalante considered himself the puppetmaster of the plot to assassinate King Conan, but Dion, Volmana, Gromel and Rinaldo—the so-called "Rebel Four"—considered him their dupe

VOLMANA

Through his princely kin in Nemedia, the dwarfish Count of Karaban persuaded King Numa of the neighboring kingdom to summon Count Trocero. This meant that Prospero and an imperial escort would go with him, leaving only Conan's personal bodyguard and the Black Legion in the city

GROMEL

The towering, Bossonian-born commander of the Black Legion despised Pallantides, leader of the Black Dragons, the king's elite guard. Gromel desired to unite both forces under his own command, and if his monarch were to be slaughtered along the way... so be it. Through him, Ascalante bribed an officer of the king's guard to lead his men away from the sovereign's door at midnight

RINALDO

Of the plotters, the poet alone had no personal ambition, but he despised this barbarian usurper of a civilized throne. His song "The Lament for the King" idealized the late Numedides and denounced Conan as "that black hearted savage from the abyss." Even the Cimmerian was touched by his poems, and rejected Prospero's suggestion that he be hanged. He felt that "a great poet is greater than any king," and that Rinaldo's rhymes would live forever.

YOU NEED NOT BE NERVOUS, MILORD. ASCALANTE'S PLOT CANNOT FAIL.
ASCALANTE CAN MAKE MISTAKES THE SAME AS ANY MAN.
NOT HE ELSE I HAD SEEN NOT HIS SLAVE, BUT HIS MASTER.
EH--?

An Enemy of an Enemy Is Hardly a Friend
When Dion, Baron of Attalus, showed Ascalante's slave a ring he had bought from a Shemitish thief who claimed to have stolen it from a wizard, little did he know with whom he was dealing.

THE DEMON OF THE RING

Thoth-amon cared nothing about Aquilonia or its kings, whether blue-blooded or barbarian born. He wanted only to reclaim the freedom he had lost when Ascalante gained possession of his stolen magic ring—and revenge on Ascalante for enslaving him!

When once more the ring was in his hands, the Stygian wizard summoned a huge, baboon-like demon. He tossed to it a sandal belonging to Ascalante and commanded him to kill the one who wore it... as well as everyone with him! With that last impulsive outburst Thoth-amon sent doom out to the other plotters and to the Cimmerian, as well.

"WHO DIES FIRST?"

When the plotters sprung their trap at midnight, they did not catch Conan sleeping, as they had hoped. Rather, they found their usurper-king armored, axe-in-hand. Conan proceeded to wreak havoc among the 20 men who attacked him. He killed all within his immediate reach, even Rinaldo, whom for an instant he tried to spare.

As his attackers advanced, the Cimmerian, though severely wounded, growled, "Who dies first?"

Ascalante, last survivor of the plotters, was desperately rushing at Conan, knife raised, when there was a rushing of air—and the demon arrived, slashing and slaying. The Count died of fear before it could touch him. But Conan, roused to fury rather than to fear, slew the demon, retained the throne, and called for a drink.

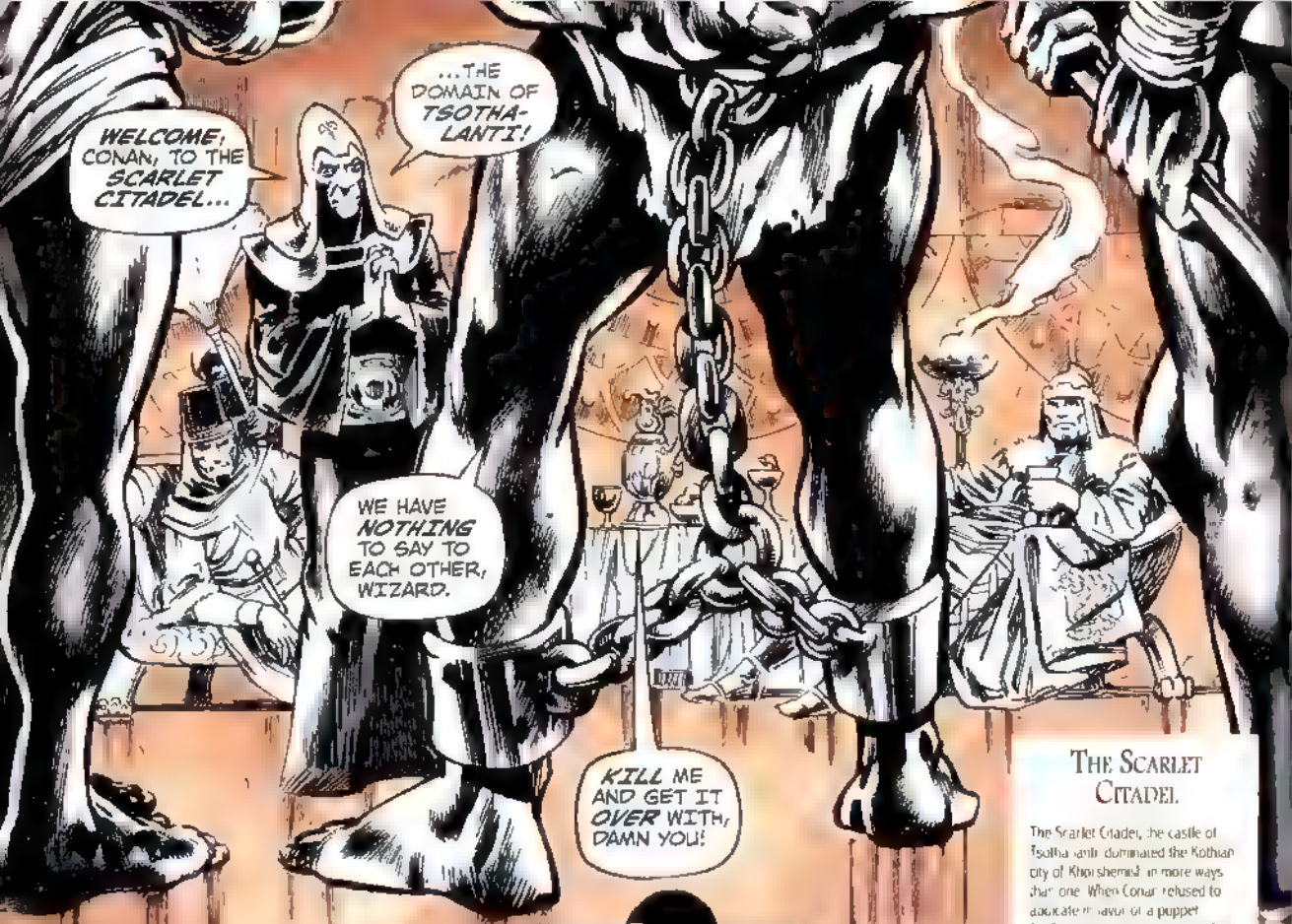
BE HE MAN OR BEAST...

Rinaldo [illegible] the demon's [illegible] appearance, which was so horrible that not even Thoth-amon [illegible] be [illegible] Conan went to work with his axe.

"AYE—AND ALL WITH HIM!"

Having summoned [illegible] with the power of his rings, Thoth-amon [illegible] the demon with a sandal, saying, "Find him who wore it, and destroy [illegible] Aye— and all with him!"

THEN, A TENUOUS SHADOW HOVERS-- GROWING IN SIZE AND CLARITY, TILL IT SOUNDS OUT DISTINCT AND HORRIFIC.
IT'S OUTLINE IS NOT UNLIKE A GIGANTIC BABOON-- BUT NO SUCH APE EVER WALKED THE EARTH, NOT EVEN IN MONSTER-BIRTHING STYGIA.
YOU HAVE CHOSEN WELL, O GOD OF SERPANTS TO SEND ME SUCH A SERVITOR!


WELCOME, CONAN, TO THE SCARLET CITADEL...
...THE DOMAIN OF TSOTHA-LANTI!
WE HAVE NOTHING TO SAY TO EACH OTHER, WIZARD.
KILL ME AND GET IT OVER WITH, DAMN YOU!

TSOTHA-LANTI & PELIAS

The wizard Tsotha-lanti was the true power behind the throne of Koth. When Strabonus, his puppet king, and Amalrus, king of Ophir, declared war on Aquilonia, they defeated Conan's army through treachery. Standing upon the battlefield, Conan was prepared to die, but Tsotha-lanti stepped forward and laid his open hand on the Cimmerian's arm. Conan fell heavily to earth.

He awoke in the Scarlet Citadel, where he met and rescued Tsotha's sorcerer rival, Pelias, who had been held captive for ten years. Once free, the mage commanded the corpse of a vile eunuch, whom Conan had killed, to open the barred door for them—and the carcass became animated just long enough to do so.

WINGS IN THE NIGHT

By now, the armies of Koth and Ophir had crossed the river into Aquilonia and were besieging Tarantia itself. Conan groaned—for they were a week's ride away. Pelias, however, summoned a great winged reptile to carry Conan to his capital. The Cimmerian took it from there.

RIVALRY REBORN

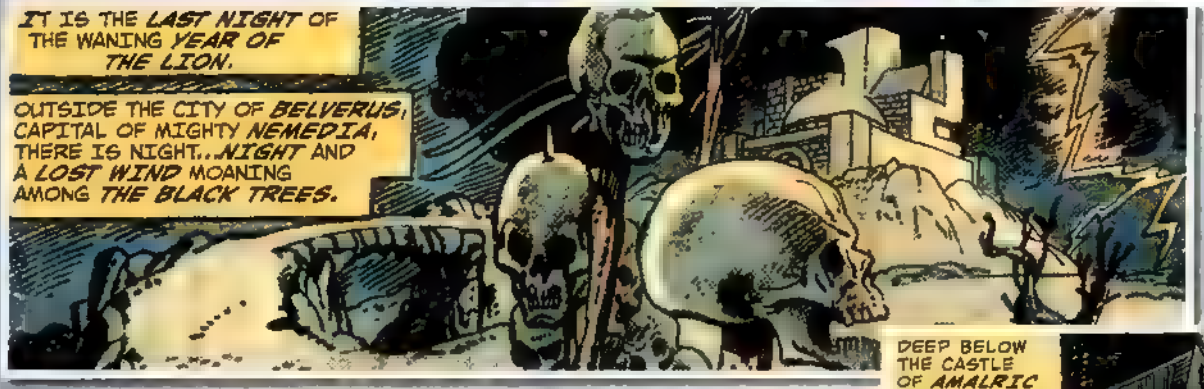
The vulture Tjo, wizard Tsotha-lanti's familiar, flew away with Conan and his kingdom. But when Pelias, a fellow wizard and rival, stepped in, the tide turned.

SEVERANCE PAY

In defeat, Tsotha-lanti remained defiant. He swore that, even if he were hacked in two, the flesh and bone would reunite against the barbarian. Conan sliced off his head to test that theory. Pelias, in the form of a huge eagle, grabbed up the severed head and flew off, laughing—with Tsotha-lanti's headless corpse in pursuit. "A murrain [pox] on these wizardly feuds!" the Cimmerian exclaimed. "Give me a clean sword and a clean foe to flesh it in!"

THE SCARLET CITADEL

The Scarlet Citadel, the castle of Tsotha-lanti, dominated the Kothian city of Khorashemish in more ways than one. When Conan refused to advocate in favor of a puppet Aquilonian prince, he was tossed into the dungeon where huge serpents slithered and a hideous, jellylike thing that had once been human begged him with its eyes to kill it. In the castle's depths, he beheld a tall man in the grip of a thick vine, its tendrils slowly draining his blood with lustful, avid kisses. Having gained a sword, Conan chopped the vine off at the root, saved Pelias—and in the process, saved his throne.


IT IS THE LAST NIGHT OF THE WANING YEAR OF THE LION.
OUTSIDE THE CITY OF BELVERUS, CAPITAL OF MIGHTY NEMEDIA, THERE IS NIGHT...NIGHT AND A LOST WIND MOANING AMONG THE BLACK TREES.

The New Plotters

Half a decade after he had assumed power in Tarantia, Conan was overthrown by a quartet of schemers, whose plot released a sorcerous horror from Time's own dungeon.

ORASTES

It was Orastes who awakened the sleeper. Once a priest of Mitra, he had abandoned the civilized god and chosen to serve the darkness, not the light. With the enchanted gem called the Heart of Ahriman, he called back to life Xaltotun of Python, who had been dead for 3,000 years. Orastes was also the first of the plotters to realize what the ancient wizard had in mind for the world—and the first of them to die at his sorcerous hand.

AMALRIC

He was the baron of Tor, a province of Nemedia, and had protected Orastes after the priest was cast down for practicing black magic. Amalric led the troops that battled Conan's forces when the far-roaming king returned to claim his throne in Aquilonia. But when at last he faced Conan, man to man, in the final battle of the war, he might as well have been wielding a fork against a lion.

TARASCUS

This younger brother of Numed, king of Nemedia, had joined the conspiracy hoping that he would one day rule in Belverus. In order to protect himself against the power of the Heart of Ahriman, he sent a servant to hurl the talisman into the Western Ocean—without Xaltotun's knowledge.

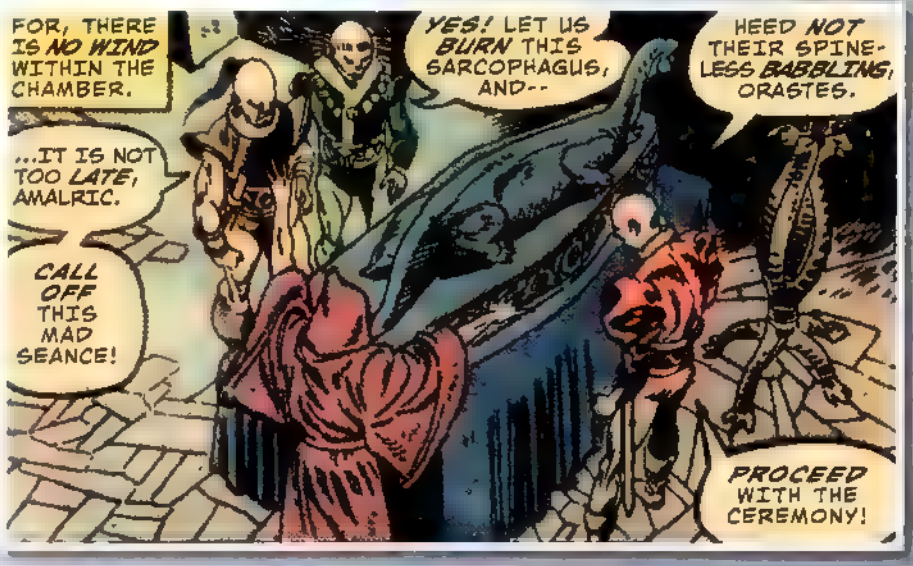
In the end, Tarascus was captured by Conan himself. The Cimmerian ransomed him for the surrender of Tarascus' army and a quantity of gold to be named later.

VALERIUS

Valerius considered himself the rightful heir to the throne of Aquilonia. He wanted nothing more than to replace the usurper king—and, for a time, he got his wish. In the climactic battle, he led his army through a magically misbound pass to attack Conan's forces. But he soon discovered that he had been led there by a man whose sons and daughters he had savaged. Mighty boulders crashed down and crushed the life out of Valerius and his soldiers.

DEEP BELOW THE CASTLE OF AMALRIC BARON OF TOR, A GOLDEN FLAME FLICKERS EERILY BEHIND A LOCKED AND BOLTED DOOR.
AND IT IS STRANGE THAT THE LIGHT THUS FLICKERS..

Dark Doings
Amalric's castle outside the capital of Nemedia, was the setting for a dark ritual that would cost Conan his throne, temporarily, and most of the plotters their lives.


FOR, THERE IS NO WIND WITHIN THE CHAMBER.
...IT IS NOT TOO LATE, AMALRIC.
CALL OFF THIS MAD SEANCE!
YES! LET US BURN THIS SARCOPHAGUS, AND--
HEED NOT THEIR SPINELESS BABBLING, ORASTES.
PROCEED WITH THE CEREMONY!

XALTOTUN OF PYTHON

Three millennia before Conan's time, the evil empire of Acheron had ruled a vast territory whose borders roughly corresponded to the those of Aquilonia, Argos, Nemedia, and several other lands that would arise in the Hyborian Age. Ruled by wizards, Acheron flourished for 2,500 years, and cruel was their yoke. But in time it was laid low by invasions of the Hyborians, streaming down from the north. And when they burned its capital city of Python, the great sorcerer Xaltotun, high priest of the serpent god Set, died with it. But during King Conan's reign, he would live again.

CONAN'S QUEST

Blinded by greed and ambition, Orastes and his fellow plotters used the Heart to revive Xaltotun in Nemedia, thinking they could control the sorcerer. At first, Xaltotun carried out their plans. King Nimed died of plague, and Tarascus mounted Nemed a's throne. When Nemedia attacked Aquilonia, Xaltotun appeared magically to Conan and paralyzed him. The Aquilonian army lost the next day's battle, and Conan was imprisoned. When he escaped, he went in search of the Heart of Ahriman, for he knew that another magician could employ it against the Acheronian. His quest took him as far as Khemi, the serpent-haunted capital of Stygia—but he returned with the mystic gem.

LOFTY GOALS BROUGHT CRASHING DOWN

Xaltotun's plans were far beyond anything the plotters imagined. He did not want to rule the world, as they did—he wanted to destroy it and use the vast blood sacrifice to wash away the Hyborian Age. Then the ancient kingdom of Acheron would materialize in its place. He would wipe out the present, restore the past, and rule it with an iron fist. But on the hill known as the King's Altar, Xaltotun beheld the Heart of Ahriman in the hands of Hadrathus, priest of Asura, and he knew he had lost. According to the Nemedian Chronicles, Conan was fighting elsewhere when a beam of blinding blue light shot from the great jewel and reduced the wizard to a withered carcass swathed in mummy wrappings.

THE HEART OF AHRIMAN

During the Hyborian invasion of Acheron's lands, Xaltotun was defeated because the mystic jewel called the Heart of Ahriman was stolen from him. In the hands of a feathered Hyborian shaman, it defeated all his sorcery. Purple-towered Python and all Acheron were destroyed, and the wizard fled to Stygia, only to be poisoned by envious priests. There he lay in a mummified state for 3,000 years, until would-be usurpers revived him with the very talisman that had brought about his downfall.

DEATH ON A HILL
By all accounts, [illegible] was the [illegible] of Xaltotun's downfall, and some legends even suggest that he was present on King Altar to administer the blow.

ZELATA

As he rode toward Taranha to face his enemies, Conan witnessed four Nemedian soldiers accosting a gaunt old woman. He went to her rescue, and her pet wolf, in turn, came to his aid at a crucial moment. Zelata was a witch-woman, who divined that Conan must flee Aquilonia. "Find the Heart of your kingdom. There lies your defeat, and your power." He took her advice even before he realized that she meant the Heart of Ahriman.

ZENOBIA

Although she figures only briefly in the saga of Conan as related by the Nemedian Chronicles, Zenobia's importance is all but immeasurable. Conan first glimpsed her through the bars of his cell when he was imprisoned in the dungeons at Belverus. She wore only jeweled breastplates and a "wisp of silk twisted about her loins." He thought she had come to mock him, but, in truth, she came to help him escape.

THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

Each of Conan's jailers carried a key to open one set of dungeon locks. She had drugged their wine and purloined their keys. Alas the barbarian had already mauled one taunting jailer, who'd had to be carried off—so she could not retrieve the key that unlocked his cell door. Conan tried one key suspiciously. It freed his limbs.

Who was this unexpected savior?

"I am only Zenobia," she murmured. She said she was part of the king's seraglio, or harem, but swore Tarascus had never touched her. She told Conan that she had fallen in love with him years before, when he rode at the head of his knights through the streets of the city on a state visit to King Nimed. The Cimmerian was touched by her heartfelt confession.

"I'LL COME FOR YOU SOME DAY!"

Lacking the key to his cell door, Conan could only sneak through a rear door. Zenobia gave him a dagger she had secreted on her person—Crom knows where!—and after he killed the man-eating ape that haunted the dark pits, he found her waiting for him. He vowed: "By Crom, I'll come for you some day." Then he escaped through a window, bent on reclaiming his throne—and Zenobia could only look on in mute farewell.

HIS FUTURE QUEEN

She makes no other appearance in the Chronicles, but she is spoken of. At the end of the portion of that deals with Conan, the Chronicles relate that King Tarascus asked what ransom would be asked for him. The Cimmerian laughed and said, "There is a girl in your seraglio named Zenobia. She shall be your ransom, and naught else."

BEYOND THE VEIL

Whether or not Conan honored his vow to return for Zenobia, the Chronicles do not say although legends maintain that he did. Some say that she bore him children, including a son called Conn, in the years that followed. If true, then perhaps the dynasty founded by Conan the Cimmerian endured long in Aquilonia!

FROM SLAVE TO QUEEN
"I will come for Belverus for her as promised," Conan told the captured king of Nemedia. "She was a slave in Numeria, but I will make her queen of Aquilonia!"

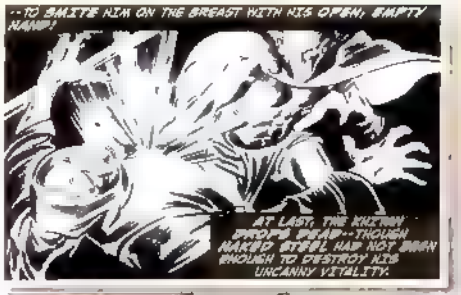
FAREWELL... FOR NOW
Swearing that he would someday return for her, Conan tore the golden bars from their window sockets and melted like a shadow into the gardens beyond.

Thutothmes & the Black Hand of Set

So powerful was the Heart of Ahriman that a prominent mage of Stygia named Thutothmes of Khemi sensed the jewel being transported southward, and went to meet it, as "from death to death it came, riding on a river of human blood."

Having gained the Heart at last, Thutothmes stood in the temple of Set in Khemi, preparing to bring back to life Stygia's long deceased wizards. His fellow priests of the Black Hand cult had been summoned to bear witness to the ritual, through which Thutothmes meant to enslave the living, including his rival, Thoth-amon. Little did they know that Conan, deposed king of Aquilonia, had his own designs on the talisman and had followed it to this unholy place. The mage had just placed it on the withered breast of a mummy, when into the great hall strode four black-robed figures, armed with staffs.

The mysterious intruders were from Khitai far to the east, and they had their own plans for the Heart. With Conan caught in the middle, the Stygians and the Khitans fought a bloody battle until only the leader of the Khitans and the Cimmerian still lived, a situation that Conan quickly remedied. By then, the Heart had restored "life" to one of the mummies, Conan, being of a practical bent, ordered the undead man to lead him out of this accursed temple, so he could head back to Aquilonia and re-conquer his throne—which he did.


--TO SMITE HIM ON THE BREAST WITH HIS OPEN, EMPTY HAND!
AT LAST, THE KHITAN DROPS DEAD--THOUGH NAKED STEEL HAD NOT BEEN ENOUGH TO DESTROY HIS UNCANNY VITALITY.

Touch and Go

One Khitan, hacked nearly to pieces by Stygian steel, stayed on his feet, clearing a path until Thutothmes touched his breast with a single palm, killing him.

Four from Khitai

The four gaunt men from distant Khitai carried long staffs cut from the living Tree of Death. Their leader meant to return to Taramna with two hearts: Conan's own for Valerius and the Heart of Ahriman for the newborn of Aquilonia. The others had attacked both to Stygia. When the battle for the jewel was joined, the priests of the Black Hand strove to touch the Khitans with their black palms. But the Khitans' staffs had the longer reach, and the priests crashed to the floor as if their very bones had turned to liquid. With a touch of his staff, the leader of the Khitans brought down Thutothmes himself, but he could not escape the wrath of Conan's sword, which separated the Khitan's head from his shoulders.

A Long Sea Voyage

Conan would have gone to the ends of the Earth to regain his throne. Perhaps in venturing to Stygia to face evil wizards and hooded Khitans, he did go to the ends of the Earth.

Conan the Triumphant

Those who opposed Conan usually found they had bitten off more than they could chew, and most never chewed again!

YAH CHIENG

After Conan reclaims the throne of Aquilonia, we have no more authenticated scrolls of the Nemedian Chronicles, except a few fragments of parchment that hint at his later exploits. But legends survive that relate what may have happened to him after age 45. Tales are told of Tarascus' treachery and a labyrinthine battle with a "Manotaur" when Conan returned to collect Zenobia. Another speaks of a wedding night in which Tsotha-lanti got head and body together again just long enough to threaten the royal couple, before they were forcibly separated for the last time.

THE RING OF RAKHAMON

According to one intriguing cycle of legends, Queen Zenobia was carried off by a winged monster, soon after her wedding to King Conan, who promptly rode off alone in search of her. In Khoraja, the wizard Pelias, whom he had once rescued from the Scarlet Citadel, told him that his bride's abductor was Yah Cheng, a sorcerer in far-off Khitai. The Kothian mage gave the Cimmerian a magical ring that might be of service to him if and when he confronted Zenobia's abductor.

In the Eastern Desert Conan was captured and dragged to Aghrapur, capital of Turan. He soon escaped and regained captaincy over a band of Vilayet pirates who remembered him from days of old. When the winged demons claimed another victim, Conan was off for Vendhya, where he was reunited briefly with Queen Yasmina.

A QUEEN RECLAIMED

Conan made his way across the snow-capped Himelian Mountains to the jungles of western Khitai. After saving a young woman named Kang Lou-Dze from a dragon, he learned that Yah Cheng's barbarous hordes had conquered Khitai. Because Conan appeared to be the fulfillment of a prophecy that a king would save them, many Khitan warriors followed him to the capital. There, he slew Yah Chieng and a winged demon, and rescued Zenobia—with a rare bit of help from Crom, chief god of the Cimmerians.

WINGS IN THE NIGHT
[illegible] enough to save Yah Cheng from the wrath of King Conan, after his winged servants carried off the beloved Zenobia.

MAGE OF THE MYSTIC EAST
Yah Chieng held sway in Khitai, far to the east of Aquilonia, from which he sent out dark shapes to do his foul bidding.

TO THE WATCHING EYE IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT TO DISCERN THE HOODED FIGURE THAT CROUCHES IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DUSTY, SCROLL-LADEN FLOOR.
NOR IS HE ALONE.

The Death of Yezdigerd

The death of Yezdigerd, king of Turan, is as much a thing of legend as everything else about him, since he is little more than a name in the Nemedian Chronicles themselves. Yet, to those who have read the many tales that surround Conan, Yezdigerd is as real as Genghis Khan or any other conqueror from the mists of history.

A BARBARIAN UNBOWED

While Conan was seeking the kidnapped Zenobia, he was captured by Turan's army and dragged back to Aghrapur. Before having Conan tortured, Yezdigerd was determined that this base barbarian would bow before him. Conan defiantly refused—and broke the log that held his bound hands behind his back. When guards formed a living shield around their king, the Cimmerian escaped by diving out of a high window into the rough breakers of the Vilayet Sea. In a stroke of luck, he was picked up by some pirates he'd known years before, and ere long, he was their captain again.

FINAL CONFRONTATION

Arrogant and prideful, Turan's king was unable to resist the temptation to pursue his old enemy in person. He chased Conan—until Conan caught him. And on the deck of the royal war galley, the two fought, blade against blade, with Yezdigerd giving a good account of himself.

But Conan was the greatest swordsman of the age, and within moments, Yezdigerd's head was rolling redly across the wooden deck of the ship. The old rivalry was ended at last.

NENAUNIR, HIGH PRIEST OF DAMBALLAH

Nenaunir, prophet and high priest of Damballah (Set), was an ebony giant who had traveled from Zembabwei to parley with Thoth-amon and his cohorts. At one word from Nenaunir, three million black men would rise, to steep all the world south of Kush with flame and blood—or so said Thoth-amon, with perhaps a trace of hyperbole.

A LONG TIME COMING

In their final battle, Yezdigerd rained blows upon his old enemy that would have felled most men—but Conan had a knack for disappointing his would-be killers.

PRA-EUN OF ANGKHOR

Pra-Eun was the sacred god-king of jungle girded Angkhor in the remote East. He was also the Lord of the Scarlet Circle, a cabal of sorcerers. When Conan came up against him in the latter stages of his recorded life, the god-king said that Conan had done him a great favor a decade earlier by killing Yah Cheng, his chief rival for power. By day's end, Pra-Eun was dead with a crossbow arrow in his back, thanks to Prospero, who arrived just in time to rescue Conan from the Angkhor's spell of paralysis.

SCORES OF SERVANTS WITH WHIPS TO STRIKE ALL LEVELS OF HUMILITIES AT THOSE WHO DARE TO APPROACH THE THRONE OF POWER...
AND ALSO CHARGES MEANS ONLY LIFE

The Death of Thoth-amon

Although the Cimmerian and the Stygian sorcerer Thoth-amon never meet face to face in the Nemedian Chronicles, in virtually all legend cycles they are each other's nemeses. Thus, it is only fitting that they, too, had a last and fatal encounter.

After Conan's forces defeated him at Nebthu, in Stygia, Thoth-amon fled to Zembabwei, stronghold of his last surviving ally, Nenaunir, High Priest of Damballah. When Conan, Conn, and Aquilonia's finest knights followed, they were attacked by black warriors riding huge winged lizards called wyverns. Carried off to a stone fortress, Conan and Conn were imprisoned with Nenaunir's brother, Mbega. After fighting and slaying a great serpent that was the earthly equivalent of Damballah, Conan spurred a revolt. Thoth-amon fled Zembabwei, and Conan and Conn pursued him. In the far-southern Land of No Return, while his forces battled Serpent Men, Conan faced his greatest antagonist in the supreme battle of barbarian against sorcerer.

Weaponless, Conan seemed doomed — until Conn stabbed the Stygian with his father's sword, on which a mage had scratched the sign of Mitra, lord of light. Thoth-amon's corpse crumbled into bones and dust—and father and son were rid of the meddlesome Stygian... weren't they?

If You Can't Kill the Father...
In legends of true, Conn took up his father's age-old fight against Thoth-amon, which meant he suddenly had a lot of enemies.

The Legend Lives
In other tales, Thoth-amon returned to life seeking vengeance. It seems that he was simply too good a villain to be left dead and underfoot, even in myth.

BUT STILL IS THOTH-AMON HELD HELPLESS IN CONAN'S GRIP--FOR, IT IS AS IF THE SORCERER TOO, HAS LEFT HIS FLESHY SHELL BEHIND--
--AND TWO IMPALPABLE SPIRITS, LOCKED IN CONFLICT RISE FROM THE VORTEX INTO A DIM REGION BEYOND THE WORLD!

CONAN

OF THE ISLES

These are the last words the Nemedian Chronicles speak of Conan the Cimmerian: "He was king of Aquilonia for many years, in a turbulent and unquiet reign, when the Hyborian civilization had reached its most magnificent high-tide, and every king had imperial ambitions. At first he fought on the defensive, but... at last he was forced into wars of aggression as a matter of self-preservation." As to whether he succeeded in crafting an empire or whether he died in the attempt, the Chronicles are silent.

"A NAMELESS CONTINENT"

Even so, it is tempting—especially so to legend-tellers over the years—to believe that certain other words in that same fragment of the Chronicles refer to a period even later in his life. By the end of his seventh decade, tales say, Zenobia was dead, having died perhaps in childbirth. Conan found his son reaching maturity, and himself growing ever more restless. And it may be to that time that this passage in the Chronicles refers: "He even visited a nameless continent in the western hemisphere, and roamed the islands adjacent to it."

This curious statement suggests that the Chroniclers were aware that the Earth is round... or at least that it was far larger than most men knew. If so, it would probably not be the first instance, and certainly not the last, in which it turned out that the ancients possessed far more knowledge than they had previously been given credit for by the sages of a later age.

The Way West

ANTILLIA

This chain of seven sizable islands in the far reaches of the Western Ocean was first inhabited, if the legends are given credence, by Atlanteans, after the Great Cataclysm had pulled their own island homeland beneath the waves. The only city in the archipelago was Ptahuacan and virtually nothing is known of its other half-dozen islands.

BARACHAN ISLES

The pirate stronghold had changed little since the Cimmerian had last been there in his pre-kingship days decades before. But where before he had been just another pirate among many more, Conan visited Tortage for the last time when

"Here Be Dragons"

This [illegible] Conan's hands, [illegible] map that might have been made from the hide of winged dragons. Whatever its origin, the once-king hoped it was accurate enough to lead him to Zenobia... and those who took her

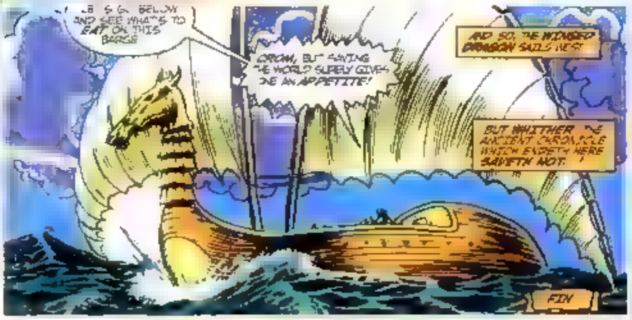
Ptahuacan

If there was another city in Atlantis's seven isles, not even legend names it. Ptahuacan was said to be inhabited by descendants of the Atlanteans, which meant they were a distant kin to Conan, although the priests of Xoth were a far cry from the shamans of Crom.

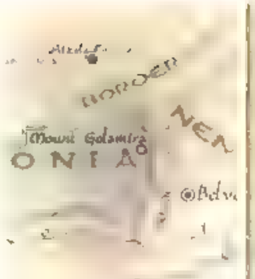
he was only passing through. According to legend, he was on his way to Antillia, in pursuit of his captured queen. Even so, the port's ramshackle wa[illegible] rang with the clash of swords that night as Conan slew an insolent pirate named Black Alvaro, who tried to stop him from raising a crew for his western voyage.

MAYAPAN

The land is a legend within a legend. The tale that tells of Conan's journey to Antillia has him setting off at story's end for the "nameless continent" of which the Nemedian Chronicles speak—named "Mayapan" by the legend's scribe. At least one later myth—if myth it be—relates that on that far-western land mass, Conan encountered a high, if sorcery-ridden, civilization comprised of many kingdoms, including Zothique and Poseidonis. And once more, the Cimmerian found himself a stranger in a strange land.



"SCARLET TORTAGE"
Thus did one legend no longer tally the pirate port of the Barachas at the time of Conan's voyage into the watery unknown. Much time had passed since he'd last seen there, but still, in that scribe's words, "Tortage roared defiance to the stars."



MOUNT GOLAMIRA

This fabled, though mysterious, Mountain of Eternal Time rears its peaks in a distant part of Aquilonia on the fringes of the Border Kingdom. According to some tales, within this mountain the legendary sage Epimetreus slumbered for a millennium and a half in a tomb guarded by a sacred phoenix. But on one or perhaps two occasions, depending on which legend one holds to be true, Epimetreus sent forth his ghost to aid the kingdom in times of dire need, when only the rough-handed barbarian king Conan could save it.

THE RED LION
The lion, king of beasts, has [illegible]

Red Shadows

In the last great legend cycle set down about Conan the barbarian, it is said that mysterious Red Shadows adbducted Count Trocero and 700 other Aquilonians. Afterward, in a dream, Conan heard himself called "Conan of the Isles" and again he found himself standing in Golamira, the Mount of Eternal Time. Epimetreus, the ageless wizard who had once saved the Cimmerian from an assassination attempt, bade him sail forth upon the Western Ocean to save his countrymen—and the world

A Dreamer's Quest

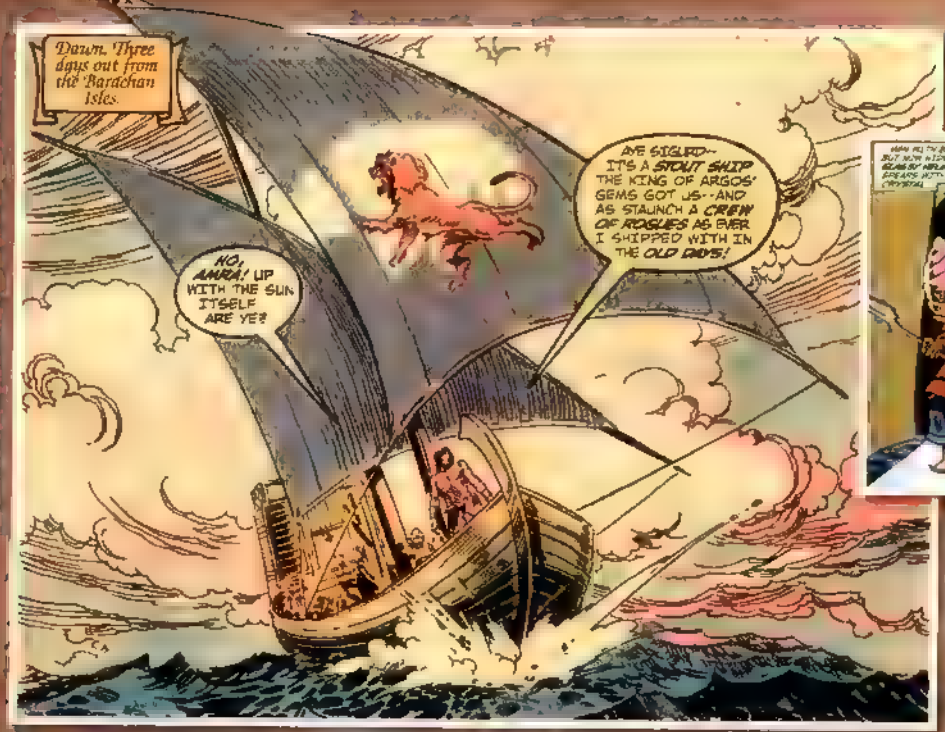
When [illegible] awoke from his mysterious dream, [illegible] Epimetreus and a cave [illegible] by phoenix. He found, [illegible] tightly [illegible], an amulet of unknown origin

Kingly Decisions

Although Epimetreus told him that the fate of the world was at stake, King Conan's early real concern was for his friend Trocero and his subjects.

A Lion Aboard a Lion

Leaving Aquilonia in Prince Conn's capable hands, the ageing king sailed aboard a vessel called the *Red Lion* to the


Dawn. Three days out from the Barachan Isles.
NO, AMRA! UP WITH THE SUN ITSELF ARE YE?
AYE SIGURD— IT'S A STOUT SHIP THE KING OF ARGOS' GEMS GOT US—AND AS STAUNCH A CREW OF ROGUES AS EVER I SHIPPED WITH IN THE OLD DAYS!

Amra Once More
Aboard the *Red Lion*, Conan was once more called Amra by his crew, which included such old friends as red-bearded Sigurd, the Vanir.

Chemical Warfare
Among the weapons employed by sailors of the dragonprows was poison gas, which they used on the crew of the *Red Lion*.

Barachan Isles. Once there, he assembled a crew that included old Yasunga from his Black Coast days, and set off westward.

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

While investigating an abandoned dragonprow flying the black kraken—emblem of the witch kings of old Atlantis—Conan found a map. It showed seven large islands, collectively known as Antillia, far west of Argos and Zingara, and a vast continent called Mayapan beyond.

Later, the *Red Lion* was attacked by a second dragonprow, its crew wearing odd glassy helmets. Conan dived overboard with one of the helmets which he found enabled him to breathe underwater. He followed his towed ship to the Antillian isle of Ptahuacan. There, he soon learned the local tongue and joined a brotherhood of thieves led by Memepho, "king of thieves," who decided to help Conan.

This "king of thieves" called the newcomer "Kukulcan," which, to Conan, seemed to be some sort of legendary title—but perhaps it was merely a corruption of "Cimmerian." Conan, who had begun his travels in the civilized world as a thief, had come full circle.

Serpent King
From tunnels beneath the city, Conan unleashed several huge reptiles upon the Ptahuacan, and used the distraction to save his captured crew.

Conan learned that when Atlantis had sunk millennia before, priests of the god Xotli had fled to Ptahuacan in flying ships powered by a force called "vril," whose secret was now lost. He also discovered that the Red Shadows he sought were spirit-servants of the high priest, sent out to replenish the supply of human sacrifices to Xotli. Tragically, Trocero and the others taken from Tarantia had already met this fate.

A CLASH OF GODS

When at last he confronted the tentacled deity Xotli, Conan unleashed the spirit of Mitra from an amulet given to him by Epimetreus. The god of light destroyed the demon-god Xotli, and Conan had his vengeance. He and his crew escaped Ptahuacan on an Antillian ship christened the *Winged Dragon*, and headed for the vast, unknown continent called Mayapan.

Ask the Sage of Golamira...

Later tales say that Conan, still hale and healthy, wandered that far western land mass of Mayapan. He encountered barbarian states founded by renegades who had fled there from Atlantis and Antillia in the days of the Great Cataclysm. Whether he did so or not, its magic ridden kingdoms, such as Zothique and Poseidonis, are reported in the annals of the ancient Atlantean priest Kvarkash-Ton. In this brave new world, Conan may well have carved out a new empire to replace the one he had left behind. Yet rumors persist in at least one later legend that an aged Conan returned to Aquilonia. Reunited with Conn, now known as Conan II, father and son waged war against ominous forces that threatened to bring down the whole of Hyborian civilization. If such tales are true, did his adventures end even there? Perhaps the answer is known to Epimetreus, spectral sage of Golamira, but surely not to mere mortal men.

EPILOGUE: THE HYBORIAN AGE AFTER CONAN

Five hundred years after the reign of King Conan, the Hyborian civilization was swept away, while its vigorous culture was still in its prime. It was the greed of mighty Aquilonia that brought about its downfall. Wishing to extend their empire, the Aquilonian kings annexed Zingara, Argos, Ophir, and western Shem, and forced other kingdoms to pay tribute. Nemedia, which had resisted its powerful neighbor for centuries, now drew Brythunia, Zamora, and, secretly, Koth into an alliance against that kingdom.

Just then, a new enemy appeared in the east. The riders of Turan, reinforced by their Hyrkanian kinsmen, swept to meet the Aquilonians on the plains of Brythunia. The Aquilonians won the day, but the back of the Nemedian resistance had been broken. Thus was the true extent of Aquilonia's power demonstrated.

A MEDDLESOME PRIEST

By a quirk of fate, it was the growing power of the Picts that was destined to throw down the kings of Aquilonia from their high places. A Nemedian priest named Arus went west into the Pictish Wilderness to introduce the worship of Mitra to the savages.

Gorm, chief of one clan, allowed him to remain.

Better for the flower of Hyboria if Arus had been skewered by a spear instead!

Arus exalted the wealthy cities and fertile plains of the Hyborian kingdoms as proof of Mitra's power. And Gorm, with unerring instincts, ignored the babble about gods and fixed his eye on the material riches so vividly described. There, in the mud-floored wattle hut, the silk-robed priest droned while the dark skinned chief crouched in his tiger hides, laying the foundations for what would become the Pictish Empire.

PICTISH INFILTRATION

At Gorm's request, Arus conducted him into the outer world, and soon, other Picts followed. Arus thought he was converting the masses of savages for Mitra, but what the Picts really wished to learn was how to mine the vast iron deposits in their hills and work that metal into weapons.

When they'd mastered these arts, Gorm asserted his dominance over other Pictish clans. Meanwhile, Aquilonia was at war and paid little

heed to the stocky Picts who swarmed to take service in her mercenary armies. Later, their service completed, these warriors went back to their Wilderness with an understanding of civilized warfare... and the contempt for civilization that arises from familiarity with it.

THE ERROR OF HIS WAYS

As for Gorm, he became Chief of Chiefs—the nearest thing to a king the Picts had had in thousands of years. Well past middle-age, he had toiled long for his position, and now he moved against the frontiers. Too late, Arus saw his mistake. He had stirred only the pagan's greed, not his soul. The priest made a last effort to undo his work—and was brained by a drunken Pict. But Gorm was not ungrateful to Arus. He caused the skull of the slayer to be set on top of the priest's cairn.

THE FIRST PICTISH INVASION

The Picts burst upon the Bossonian frontiers, clad now in scale-mail, wielding weapons of iron. For years, the Bossonians held the invaders at bay, while the Aquilonian Empire waxed strong with arrogance and its armies moved against Nemedia. But its glittering ranks were filled mostly with mercenaries, especially Bossonians, leaving scarcely enough men in the north to guard the frontier. When Picts raided their homeland, entire Bossonian regiments quit the Nemedian campaign and marched westward, where they defeated the Picts. What remained of the Aquilonian army was defeated by the Nemedians. Afterwards, a vengeful Aquilonia attacked its own province of Bossonia, then its armies marched south, leaving a devastated land behind them.

THE SECOND PICTISH INVASION

Soon, the second wave of Pictish invaders flooded over those borders. They were led by Gorm himself —now an old man, but with fierce ambition aplenty. This time, there were no sturdy Bossonian warriors in their path, and the blood-mad barbarians swarmed into Aquilonia proper before the remnants of her legions could return from the east. Whole regiments of mercenaries and vassals mutinied and marched back to their home countries, and the Picts surged irresistibly eastward. Then the wild-born Cimmerians swept down from their northern hills, completing the ruin... and the Aquilonian Empire went down in fire and blood!

THE END OF THE HYBORIAN AGE

Following the collapse of Aquilonia, the Turanians and Hyrkanians united under one great ruler and closed in from the east. With no Aquilonian armor to oppose them, they swept over several Hyborian kingdoms, and even clashed with the fierce Cimmerians. Meanwhile, the Picts made themselves the masters of Aquilonia, massacring most of its inhabitants. Interestingly, the Picts were most likely the only thing that kept the Turanians from adding even Stygia to their widening empire. As for Gorm, he died in battle, 75 years after he had first heard tales of the western lands from the lips of Arus, priest of Mitra. Long enough for a man to live, or a civilization to die.

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